S.F. Digest

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ADVERTISING: For all space orders and sales enquiries, contact: Tim Boydall or Gerry Walker-Dendle, SOCIO-COMMUNICATIONS LTD, New English Library, Barnard's Inn, London EC1N 2JR. Tel: 01-242 0767.

Printed by Severn Valley Press Limited, Caerphilly, Mid Glam, Wales

SF DIGEST is published by New English Library Ltd, Barnard's Inn, Holborn, London EC1N 2JR, tel: 01-242 0767

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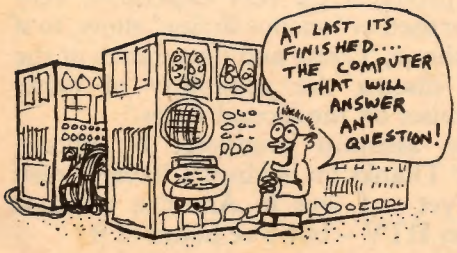
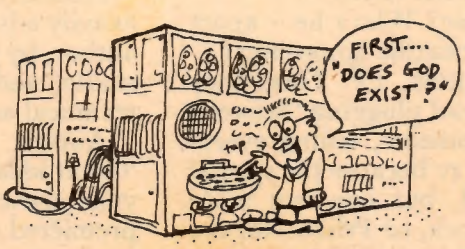
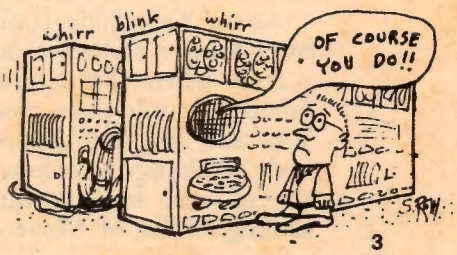
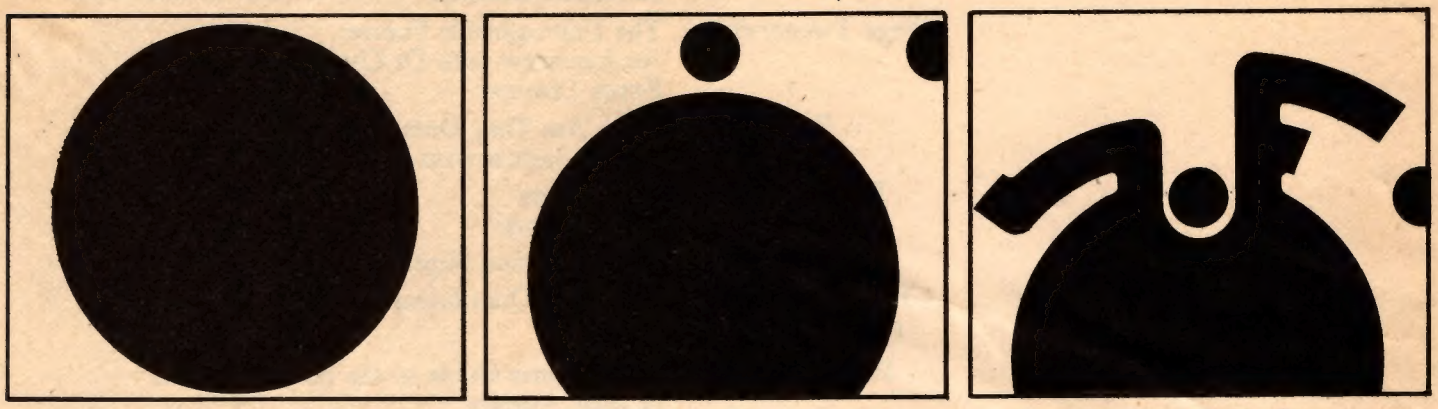






Guest Editorial—by John Brunner



Every year, authoritative sources declare that science fiction is taking a bigger and bigger share of the paperback market. In America, we're told, it's pushing ten per cent. This must indicate that there's a huge audience for it in other media, too. Indeed, whenever they announce a major sf movie or a million-pound sf series for television, there are cries of joy.

Yet when the show in question has its première, groans of dismay almost drown the tinkle of cash pouring into the producer's coffer. They come from precisely those who looked forward with greatest eagerness to what, they claim, has let them down – worse, made them feel cheated.

Why?

Well, the people who for long had been aware how good, how stimulating, how compelling the finest of sf can be, naturally assumed that if a piece of science fiction were being transferred to the screen it must be of exceptional quality. Why should anyone disposing of the vast funds required for such a project waste them on third-rate stuff?

In the (I submit) reasonable expectation that 'All Tomorrow's Yesterdays' would be scripted by, if not Anderson or LeGuin or Tiptree, then someone of at least notional competence in the field, they paid inflated prices for their cinema tickets, and when the credits rolled . . .

Abner Turpitude Junior? Who's he – apart from being a style-deaf scientific ignoramus?

And when they consulted *TV Times* they found a double-page spread plugging 'Between You and Me and Andromeda', telling everybody to change to colour tv because the special effects were so beautiful, but nowhere mentioning Aldiss, or Moorcock, or Priest. No, the opening segment was by Millicent Codswallop (*who?*) with additional dialogue by Edgar Allen Schmoe (WHO?) . . .

And so forth.

Now I don't personally know these people any better than you do. (Why should one want to, given the horrible nonsense they churn out?) But some facts about them are obvious. They have noticed sf becoming very popular, and have caught the scent of a chance to make money out of it.

Only they're too lazy, or maybe too dim, to figure out *why* it's become a success. Their knowledge of science and engineering is derived from second-hand comic-books, usually with no acknowledgement, and their powers of observation of real human beings are apparently non-existent; at any rate, they concoct unspeakable dialogue and order their poor actors to behave in lunatic ways with neither logic nor motivation.

And they are unconcerned about what happens to sf once they finish messing about and go elsewhere. (Soon, please? Pretty please?)

This is not, of course, a new phenomenon. I'm old enough to recall *The Monolith Monsters*, in which a Hollywood director – working to a low budget, admittedly, but surely not that low? – allowed an actor playing the part of a reporter to visit, re-visit, and re-re-visit the scene of an intrusion by alien crystals without taking a camera . . .

You know, science fiction writers grow very tired of having people come up to them at conventions and say, 'I just saw *Robot on the Rampage*, and it was awful! Why don't you write a good science fiction film?'

To which we are obliged to insist that we keep on trying, we really do! But . . .

Well, here, I regret to say, is a true story.

Assistant producer on very expensive, very heavily advertised tv 'science fiction' show, to sf author, by phone, 'Come and have lunch at the studio and discuss the possibility of being technical adviser on the second series.'

Author to assistant producer, by phone, 'Great idea! Thanks for asking! I haven't seen your show yet – I was in America when it premièred on HTV – but I've heard of it.'

(Author sees one segment.)

Author to assistant producer, by letter, 'Your writer was too lazy to look up the symptoms of radiation sickness in the dictionary.* I hope this isn't typical. Children's shows must be more, not less, honest than those for adults.'

Author to literary agent, by phone, 'I'm not sure my reputation will survive involvement with something this sloppy. Ask for a consultation fee. If they're serious about improving their standards, they'll pay up.'

(Author goes to London SF Circle meeting, and is told that the show in question is actually intended not for children but an adult audience . . . inclining him to despair of the television generation.)

Assistant producer to author, by letter, 'Sorry to be told by your agent that you are not interested in acting as a technical adviser on our show.'

Author to assistant producer, by letter, 'Next time call in me or one of my numerous capable colleagues *before* your show has been wrecked past recovery!'

Because, of course, the said author was very interested indeed in the idea of acting as consultant to a tv series. The trouble was, purely and simply, that the basic argument of the series was, and is, nonsense; the script-writing is invariably appalling; and the direction can be described by no politer term than 'floundering'.

The explosions are awfully pretty. But that's not enough to justify a tv show.

I could continue, citing Harry Harrison on the script-writer who was too stupid to realise that 'soylent green' was meant for a mix of soya with lentils. Or, were it not restricted to members of SF Writers of America, I could quote a heartfelt cry from William Nolan, co-author of *Logan's Run*, concerning the mess that's been made of his skilfully constructed and motivated plot in the forthcoming screen version. I could, equally, tell you about the long sad chat I had with Kit Pedler, of *Doomwatch* fame, shortly after he had felt obliged to dissociate himself from the show because of what the BBC were doing to make it 'trendier'. I could point to the late John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*, and recount how it came about that the entire sum originally allotted for the movie version was spent without getting ninety minutes of usable film in the can. I could recall with sentiment BBC-TV's *Out of the Unknown*, and remark that even when, thanks to the success of its first season, the budget per show was increased by fifty per cent, there was no corresponding hike in the rate paid for the stories.

I have once or twice said unkind things about *Star Trek*. Faced with what we have now, I withdraw them all, even though from its second season onward the plots tended to make use of other peoples' surplus set-material: western, historical, or any other bargain buy. From the book *The Making of Star Trek* one learns that a sincere effort was made to reason out its imaginary universe in detail.

Now that sounds like a recipe for good sf, doesn't it? Of course it does. It was the same process that generated, for example, *Metropolis* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, *Things to Come* and *It Came from Outer Space*, and a whole list of productions that shine like the proverbial good deed in a naughty world. Their example exists!

Why, then, should the most expensive sf series ever put on television have given rise, in the States, to parties at which the game played by sf fans is to see who can spot the most, and silliest, mistakes?

Confronted with such garbage, people previously unacquainted with our field, but who do have high standards in drama and literature and above all television, gasp in horror and say, 'That's science fiction? But it's dreadful!'

And they're right.

Who are these clods, these clowns, who thanks to their grasp on the purse-strings and their contempt for you and me are denying the mass audience access to the most vigorous, most relevant, most entertaining branch of contemporary fiction, by passing off in place of it a castrated fake?

And what can we do about them – quickly, before once again their hamhanded incompetence obliges readers of magazines like this one to conceal the cover for fear of ridicule?

*See, for example, *Chambers* (1972 edition), p 1113.

TRADIN

'It's not in our usual line of business,' said Trader Jack. 'This is a trading post, not a warehouse.'

I made frantic signs to him. We could do with the cash.

'Then again,' continued Trader rapidly, having received my well-directed kick to the shin, 'I can't see that it would do any harm.'

'We will pay you well,' remarked the Bernadian encouragingly.

'What do you say, Bo?' asked Trader, turning to the third member of our partnership.

I call Bo-8 the third member for the sake of convenience. In fact he, like all Vegans, consists of several distinct parts; one brain and a number of bodies, controlled telepathically. (Vega is a hostile planet, so the brains are guarded underground and only the bodies venture to the surface.)

The profits of Jack's Trading Post are split three ways; one third to Trader Jack, one third to myself, (my name is Rodney Black and I, like Trader, am human) and one third to Bo-8. So Bo-8 is either the third partner, or the third through to the tenth. But he only gets one third of the profits, which rankles.

At present Bo (the brain) reposed in a box on the conference table while -1 (a body) sat opposite me. Trader Jack sat opposite the prospective customer, a member of the wily Bernadian race.

'Let's just run over the facts again,' said the mouth of Bo, activated from the box on the table. 'As I see it, you want to leave the merchandise in our safe keeping. Just that and no more.'

'Right.'

'Why?'

'This merchandise is part of an important development plan', explained the Bernadian patiently, 'which has been the subject of some discussion, not to say disagreement, between ourselves and the Krax. As you know, we are an industrial world and our economy depends on business like this. Sometimes we get inconvenienced. Specifications are changed, and such-like. As in this case.'

'Too bad,' sympathised Trader. He shrugged back into his chair, eyeing the Bernadian shrewdly, stroking his long beard gently. The beard was part of his stock-in-trade, designed to give the illusion of honest-to-goodness old-fashioned dependability. He smoked a pipe for the same reason. Human customers were doubtless impressed by this façade, but as most of our clients were alien I felt that, in the interests of hygiene, he could have done without the props.

'Things have reached such a pitch', continued the Bernadian, 'that it has been agreed to meet on neutral ground to exchange contracts, receive payment and accept delivery. The Krax suggested here, and we agreed.'

'Why here?' asked Bo-8. He was by nature suspicious and had on many previous occasions prevented the impetuous Trader from rushing into a deal headlong, blinded by the glitter of gold.

'It's about half-way between the two planets. Not only that, but it was felt that a man of Trader Jack's experience' (here my partner inclined his head modestly) 'would be invaluable in seeing fair play and settling any disputes . . . As I said before, you will be well paid.'

Trader ran his fingers through his beard, ruminatively. 'There's no . . . um . . . danger involved, is there? I mean, the Post won't become the centre of a galactic incident, will it?'

I could tell what he was thinking. He

TRADIN

THE POST

MICHAEL G CONEY

had built up the Post with a reputation for square dealing and security (not entirely deserved) and he didn't want everything wrecked by an interplanetary punch-up.

The Bernadian vibrated a slender tentacle, which meant that he smiled deprecatingly. You get to know these things. 'Of course not. I can give you my word on that.'

'What about the Krax?' asked Bo-8.

'The Krax are peaceable folk.'

'What do you say, Bo?' asked Trader.

'Sounds OK to me. We'll want written guarantees, of course. Insurance, and so on. What does the merchandise consist of?'

'Power units.'

'Nuclear?' asked Trader anxiously.

'Electrical.'

'Oh, that's OK, then.' Trader looked relieved. 'You happy about all this, Rod?'

I nodded, and we got down to the details. We discussed, haggled, and signed papers in triplicate and at great length. Three hours later everything was settled and the partnership was a little richer. Payment had been made in advance for storage and consultancy fees.

'Shall we unload now?' suggested the Bernadian.

We regarded him in some surprise.

'You mean you've brought the units with you?' asked Trader.

'Of course. I'm on my way to Paradis to pick up a return load, so I might as well drop this lot off now. It's not bulky.'

I was tired. I wanted to go to bed. 'Can't we leave it until tomorrow?' I asked.

Perhaps I'd better fill you in on a few details. Trader Jack's Post is an antiquated cartwheel station whirling somewhere between Paradis and the Lesser Naiads. Years ago it was a refuelling station for Universal Spaceways until improvements in stellar drive made it redundant, when Trader Jack bought it up.

Renamed Trader Jack's Post, the place is now famous throughout this corner of the Galaxy. Business has become so big, in fact, that Trader Jack was forced to take on partners, which is where Bo-8 and I come in. Scarcely a trampship or cargo-liner passes within lightyears without stopping off here for relaxation and trade. We buy and sell everything except livestock. We've even got Trader's original CVX scout tethered outside, and it wouldn't surprise me if we sold that, some day.

As I said, the Post is antiquated, and we don't have a gravity unit. 'What's wrong with good, natural centrifugal force?' Trader has often said, when we've suggested buying one of the new units. 'It's cheaper, too.'

Maybe so, but have you ever tried mooring up to a mile diameter of spinning ironwork, and then unloading?

At times like this we are glad of Bo-8. Due to the difficulties of handling merchandise, unloading is given priority, sorting and stacking can come later. The main thing is to get the stuff into the Post without having any of it fly off into space, to disappear for ever. There's nothing so lost as a crate dropped from a centrifugal station.

So the Bernadian ship departed leaving us regarding a huge mound of boxes. Trader sat on the rusty floor and lit his pipe. 'Go to it, Bo,' he murmured encouragingly. He looked like a throwback from the days of the West; dressed in brown mock-leather

THE POST

TRADIN

clothes of dubious cleanliness he might, that moment, have dismounted from his palomino and be preparing to make camp.

I sat down beside him to watch the stacking scene, which always fascinated me.

Bo's bodies are built something like Earth starfish but bigger, being about eight feet tall with five legs, or arms, or tentacles. There is no discernible right way up and the things can, and do, roll along quite rapidly like a wheel, when Bo so desires. At the axis is set the mouth and eye.

Eight of these bodies were present, one of them carrying the box containing the brain. This represents the sum total of Bo-8's corporate existence.

The present brain-bearer placed the box on the floor between Trader and I, and the bodies set to work. Their co-ordination was fantastic. The eight giant figures moved as one; lifting, handling, passing from one to the other, carrying and stacking so that the entire job, which would have taken a team of humans three hours' solid sweating and swearing, was completed inside thirty minutes.

'Well done, Bo,' remarked Trader, tapping out his pipe on the box and climbing to his feet.

'I wish you wouldn't do that, Trader,' snapped the nearest body sourly. 'You know it plays havoc with my telepathic transmissions. I might easily have dropped something.'

'Sorry.' Trader bent down and picked up the box gently. I caught sight of a sly grin within his beard. 'Catch!' he called suddenly, making as if to lob the box at the body.

There was no reaction. 'I'm aware of your warped sense of humour,' came the icy reply, as the body remained casually at rest. 'It is typical of the human race that it feels obliged to mock the physique of species differently formed from itself.'

'I can't think what we would do without you, Bo,' I said hastily, with a warning glance at Trader. I didn't want Bo-8 going on strike.

PAINTING BY TIM WHITE

G POST

'Neither can I,' replied Bo significantly, stepping forward and taking the box.

'Right. Let's take a look at what we've got.' Trader changed the subject.

'You mean break open a crate?' I asked, astonished.

'Of course. I like to know what we're carrying. Never trust these Bernadians; there could be bombs in those boxes.'

'You're right, of course,' Bo-8 agreed. He possessed much the same code of ethics as Trader. These things were catching. At the far end of the storeroom two of the bodies began enthusiastically attacking a crate.

'Bring one over here, Bo,' Trader commanded, as the crate yielded to their endeavours revealing a tightly packed mass of cardboard boxes, each about one foot by two. 'We'll take it back to the main cabin and have a look at it in comfort.'

Seven of Bo-8's bodies lined up against the storeroom wall and climbed into the seven steel cabinets provided for their off-duty relaxation. Each cabinet contained the minimum requirements for existence; a heater and a tube from which flowed a thin soup of oxygenated nourishment. The needs of the bodies were few; they were rugged creatures. They had to be, coming from a place like Vega VI. However, just in case something did go wrong inside the cabinets, the brain of Bo was in constant subconscious telepathic touch, monitoring the nerve-centres.

So, five minutes later, just the three of us assembled in the main cabin. Trader Jack laid the cardboard box on the table. We sat down. Bo-8 placed his brain on the table beside the cardboard box. I was interested to note that Bo's box was about half the size of the cardboard box and wondered, irrationally, whether the latter contained two brains.

'Right,' said Trader, rubbing his hands. He was enjoying this. You came across some queer merchandise in a space trading station. I don't think any of us believed the box contained an electrical power unit.

Trader seized the box in his gnarled hands and clawed at the covering with clumsy eagerness, like an ageing rapist. Soon we were looking at a metal object, oblong, two foot by one, black stove-enamelled, mysterious.

'What is it?' murmured Trader.

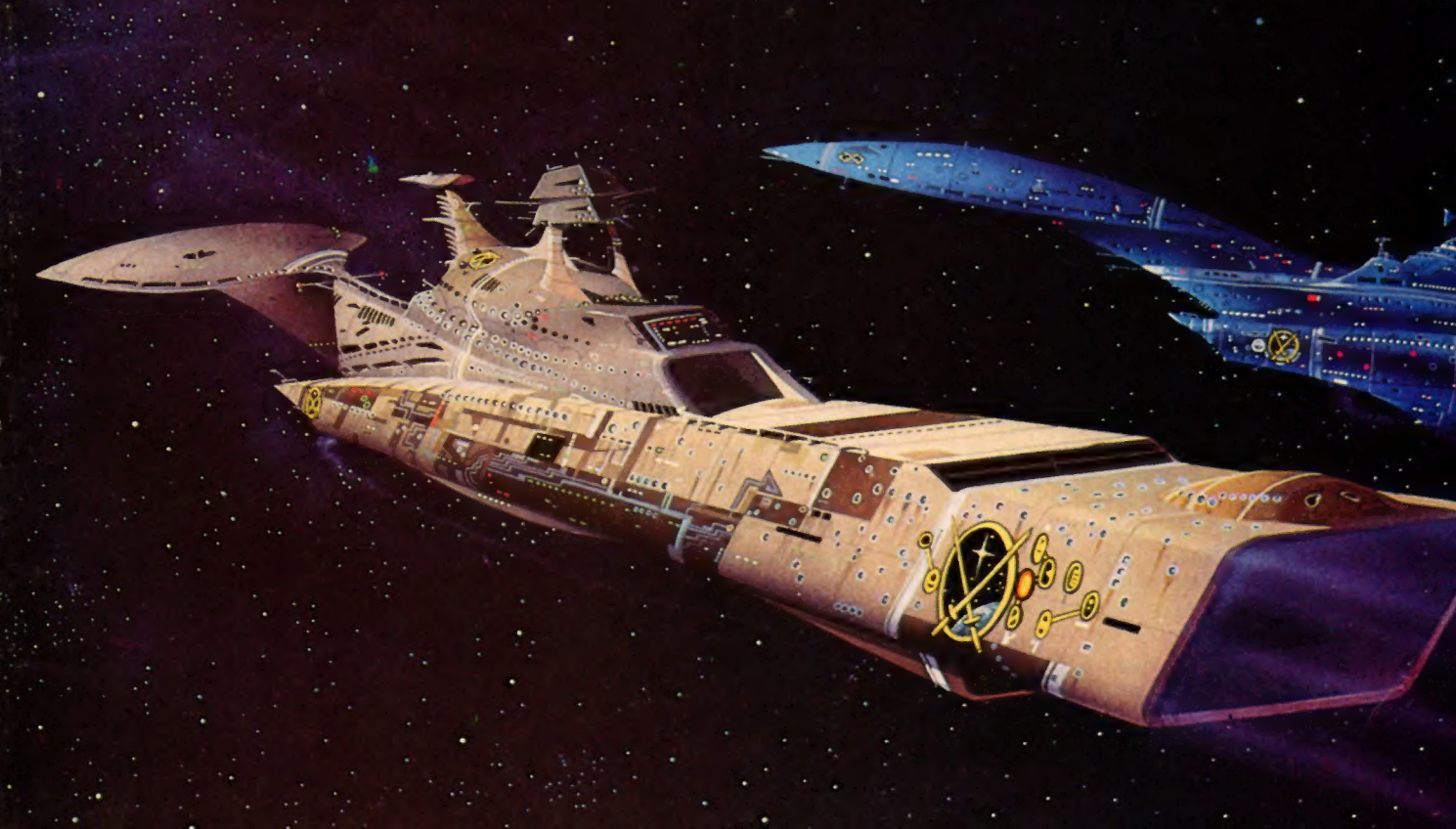
'Perhaps it's an electrical power unit,' ventured Bo-8.

'Crap,' said Trader shortly. 'What's this?' He had turned the thing round, and on one face of the oblong was a row of sockets and a red button, accompanied by lettering. He turned the lettering towards Bo, our linguistics expert.

'It says "Activate",' volunteered the alien.

'Fair enough,' said Trader, pressing the button.

Nothing happened. The box remained on the table. We remained in our seats. The Trading Post spun on, somewhere between Paradis and the Lesser Naiads.



'Disappointing,' observed Trader.

Several hours later we reassembled in the main cabin, refreshed by sleep. Breakfast had been a hasty affair; Trader Jack bolted his food rapidly, eager to get back to the strange metal object, and Bo-8 never ate breakfast anyway. Once every twelve hours one of the bodies opened the box and changed the nutrient fluid around the brain; that was all the feeding Bo required.

'Let's get started, then.' Trader was unfastening a tool kit. He took out a screwdriver and examined the surface of the metal, seeking a means of entrance.

'Do you think we ought to?' I asked. It seemed all wrong, somehow; a breach of faith. Whatever the box was, it had been entrusted to our safe keeping.

I have always been conscious of the fact that the success of our Trading Post is largely due to the various planetary races' mutual distrust, rather than their faith in us. In a galaxy of bank-robbers, the pickpocket is reckoned an honest man, but it doesn't do to stretch things too far.

'It's broken, isn't it?' Bo-8 pointed out. 'Trader's going to fix it, that's all. We can't have the Bernadians unloading dud goods onto the Krax.'

'Why not try some of the others', I suggested, 'and see if they work. There's no need to start dismantling the thing. Maybe they have to be plugged into a power source. I expect that's what the sockets are for.'

'We'll soon find out,' said Trader, plying the screwdriver.

'In any case', Bo-8 put in, 'the sockets are labelled "Directional Control Output" in Bernadian. So the power source is inside. A battery, I expect. Batteries can be useful,' he added, inconsequentially.

'You're on watch,' Trader informed me sharply. 'We'd look pretty stupid if a Gleg pirate ship tied up alongside while you were fooling around in here.'

'Better get going,' added Bo-8.

In face of such massive opposition I had no option but to leave them to their task. I had an unpleasant suspicion that we would shortly be offering a new line in cheap batteries to the galactic trade. There must have been a couple of thousand of these units in the storeroom, each one with its replaceable power cell.

On opening the door to the observation room I found to my alarm that it was full of milling aliens and in the viewport loomed the vast bulk of a ship, moored alongside. I slammed the door hastily, drawing my stunner, and debated my next move. Naturally I didn't relish the notion of returning to the main cabin and informing Trader that the Post had been captured by Gleg pirates, but it seemed I had no alternative. He would find out soon enough, and it would sound better coming from me.

The Gleg pirate is the scourge of this quarter of the galaxy. Of no fixed abode, he flits about in the deep night of space alighting here and there as the fancy takes him, sucking his victim dry like a celestial vampire. He is utterly ruthless and has little regard for life, human or alien.

I turned and came face to face with another alien. 'Don't shoot,' he said quickly as I raised the stunner. 'Are you Trader Jack?' he asked in Galingua, as my finger firmed on the trigger.

'No,' I replied. 'Are you a Gleg pirate?'

'No,' he replied, and I believed him. He didn't look Gleg. Of obviously avian origin, he stood about five feet tall and looked extremely fragile. The Glegs, so I am told, are thick-set and powerful, originally from a heavy-gravity planet.

So now he knew who I wasn't, and I knew who he wasn't. Introductions over, we entered the observation room which was filled with the twitterings of many creatures like the one I had met. I stood on a chair and shouted.

'Shut up!' They shut up and stood watching me nervously, about fifty of them, rustling feathery arms and shifting on claw-like feet. The floor was littered with their droppings and the room stank.

'Now . . . ' I had their attention. 'Who's the leader of you lot?'

'I am the captain of the Beaque ship *Gloriana*,' replied the alien I had met outside, with a certain effete dignity.

'If you want to do business with this establishment,' I said severely, 'it has to be done in an orderly fashion. What do you want? And what are this crowd', I gestured at the flapping multitude, 'doing here, ruining the carpet? Get them out. Then come back alone and I'll see what we can do for you.'

'I'm sorry.' The Beaque captain pulled himself together and controlled his nervous flutterings. 'My people are frightened. They wouldn't stay in the *Gloriana* without me. You see, they're not spacemen. They're colonists, on their way to people a new planet.'

'Pleasant journey,' I said with a note of finality.

'But now we can't get there. We have no supplies.'

'Amazing what people can forget.'

'You don't understand,' he said patiently. 'We were attacked, between the Lesser Naiads and here. A Gleg pirate ship' (he shuddered, fluttering and rustling again) 'came alongside and robbed us. They took everything we had.'

'Including money?' I asked keenly.

'We didn't have any. We only carried supplies and equipment. Money's not much use when you're founding a new colony.'

'How do you expect to do business with us, without money?' I asked.

'We don't,' replied the alien humbly. 'We thought maybe, rather than let us starve, you being renowned for fair dealing, you might lend us enough food to see us through to our destination. We will pay you back when we get established. We, too, are renowned for fair dealing.'

Something about this pathetic crowd finally got through to me. 'Wait a bit,' I said. 'I'll go and talk things over with my partners.'

The alien fluttered again. 'Don't be too long,' he twittered. 'We want to be gone before the Glegs get here.'

'What!'

'Didn't I say? They're heading this way. The Gleg ship was waiting to rendezvous with some others, then they were coming here in force, following our initial suggestion that you were wealthier than us. We wouldn't like to be here when that happens.'

'Thanks very much for the warning,' I said sarcastically, and made for the main cabin at a run.

As I entered, Bo-8 was sawing the oblong box neatly in half with a laser. 'The screwdriver wouldn't touch it,' he said regretfully. He thrust a tentacle among the tangle of wires revealed, and drew out a printed circuit with attached transistors and other assorted electrical oddments. There was also a small cube which looked like a battery. 'We'll soon get the hang of this,' he murmured. Trader Jack was meanwhile rifling through the pages of an electrical manual.

'The Glegs are coming,' I informed them tersely.

My announcement drew a blank.

'I've got a diagram here which I think fits that,' said Trader Jack, so immediately that I thought he was talking to me.

'Here. Lay it down flat . . . ' Bo-8 swept an area of table free from wires and blobs of metal. 'Let's have a look . . . Yes, I think you're right, although

it takes a bit of believing. I reckon I know what this is . . . '

'I said, the Glegs are coming,' I repeated loudly. This time I got through.

'What!' Trader Jack leaped to his feet; Bo-8 did likewise.

'And the observation room's full of birds,' I added, rubbing in the impression that things had got out of hand.

'Come on!' yelled Trader, making for the door. 'Defence positions, everybody!'

As I raced through the echoing steel corridors towards the observation room I heard the first distant clang of a magnetic grappler securing itself to the hull. The Glegs were here.

The Beaques were in a state of total panic when I arrived, panting, at the observation room. The air was filled with twitterings and feathers and the creatures were hopping and shuffling; some of them, in obedience to ancient race memories, were flapping their arms vigorously.

'Shut up!' I shouted. It seemed to be my standard greeting to these folk.

'The Glegs are here!' shrilled the frail captain, beating rapidly but lightly at my chest with his forearms. 'We heard their grapplers!' Fearfully his eyes wandered to the viewport.

A ship glided past, then another, correction rockets squirting as they manoeuvred in a tight circular course, hulls painted with the crossed-swords insignia of Gleg. They were closing quickly and the Post echoed to another far-off clang. That made two ships secured, somewhere on the other side of the Post. They would be here in minutes. We didn't stand a chance.

It was all very well for Trader to speak of defence positions, but how can three people defend a huge cartwheel of a station, a mile in diameter, when enemy ships are fastening themselves like leeches at several points of the circumference? You just can't get there in time, and, even if you could, there would be very little you could do about the situation. The Glegs would now be burning their way in and would enter the Trading Post dozens at a time. We weren't equipped to deal with this sort of attack.

'What are you going to do?' squawked the Beaque captain.

'Surrender, I suppose.'

'You can't do that. They'll kill us all!'

'I don't see why they should. They didn't kill you, when they captured your ship. So far as I understand it, they're after portable equipment and supplies. There's no point in killing us. They'll just take what they want, and go.'

'It would be easier for them to kill us!'

'Murder carries a death penalty,' I reassured him.

'That's not much consolation,' he twittered. 'Piracy carries a death penalty, too.'

He was right. I was getting nervous myself, now. At that moment the door burst open.

Trader Jack and Bo-8 entered, followed by two Glegs armed with blasters. One of them motioned towards me and I dropped my stunner to the floor. Although the immediate effect of either weapon is similar, one is at a great psychological disadvantage shooting it out with stunner against blaster. The latter is so permanent. Besides, they had the drop on me.

This was my first sight of Glegs and they were impressive, I must admit. A thick, rotund body mounted on four powerful legs, they were naked and hairy with heads forward-thrust, not unlike gorillas. From their massive shoulders sprouted two enormously thick arms. They stood about five feet tall and looked ugly customers. They scared me.

'Over there.' The superior Gleg, a ribbon in his neck-hairs denoting rank, motioned us across the observation room to where we stood among the cowering Beaques. The smell was appalling, like a battery hen-house in July. The Glegs then conferred quietly in their own language. I noticed that one of them had a walkie-talkie slung around his neck. From time to time, as they talked, they glanced at Bo-8.

'I don't think they've fathomed Bo yet,' Trader whispered. 'They don't know there's more than one of him. You see he's left his brain-box behind?'

I laughed nervously, drawing a curious glance from the Glegs. 'Do you suppose he'll come charging to our rescue?' I asked sarcastically. 'Seven unarmed bodies against these people? You've got to be joking!'

'They've only got skeleton crews in the other ships,' Trader said. 'They're cargo ships for the booty.'

'How many ships are there altogether?'

'Five. Four of them have a crew of three each. The flagship, that's where these two came from, has about two dozen.'

'Is that all?' I asked. It still seemed that we were outnumbered. 'How do you know all this?' I asked curiously.

'I've heard about these people before. Since they represent the only threat to the Post I could think of, I've made it my business to study their methods. The flagship is the only ship we've got to worry about. The others are just hulks.'

This calmness under pressure was another of Trader's poses like the pipe and beard, but an exceptionally annoying one. When I am scared, I prefer those around me to act scared too. There was an obvious link between his reference to Bo's undiscovered bodies and the old movies in our library which frequently featured the US cavalry arriving in the nick of time. The truth of the matter was that we were in a jam and I wished he'd pocket his pipe and his pride and damned well admit it.

A further six Glegs filed into the room and spoke rapidly with their captain. His ape-like face twisted into an unpleasant grin and he approached us.

'Just in case you were getting any ideas,' he said, 'we've found the rest of your crew. Seven brutes like him.' He tapped Bo on the nerve-centre. 'Don't kid me there are any more, either. They were in seven cabinets in one of the storerooms.' No wonder Bo was slumped in a dejected silence. He hadn't the heart to tell us.

'Very convenient.' The Gleg grinned again. 'They're helping us load, right now.'

So much for the cavalry.

After a further conference seven of the Glegs shuffled heavily out of the room leaving the eighth in charge. He regarded us warily, making passes with his blaster and muttering. He was obviously trigger-happy. Trader and I tried to remain as still as possible, while Bo was absolutely motionless; cut off, no doubt, from the brain which was at present engaged elsewhere, supervising the pillage of our working capital.

It was an interesting thought that the Glegs were probably not aware of the existence of the brain and regarded the various parts of Bo as separate entities; but I couldn't see any way to turn this to advantage.

After a few minutes silence there was an abrupt tragedy, totally unexpected.

The shufflings of the Beaques had been growing steadily more noticeable. They were jostling about in undisciplined fashion, close to complete panic, and I heard Trader swear as he stumbled forwards towards the Gleg, impelled by a sudden surge of bodies behind him.

Then, with a squawk of unleashed terror, a Beaque made a fluttering dash for the air-lock, diagonally across the room from where we stood.

His route took him past the Gleg at the door and, as he passed, the Gleg burned him down efficiently. He

tumbled to the floor in a heap of scorched flesh and feathers, mewed once, and was still. An unpleasant aroma arose, not unlike overcooked chicken.

I wheeled around, my back to the Gleg, and with outstretched arms struggled to hold back as many milling Beaques as I could manage. Trader, beside me, was doing the same, and after a tense moment the creatures quietened.

'There was no need for that,' Trader addressed the Gleg coldly.

I was shaken by the incident and by the thought of what might have happened. God knows what carnage there would have been if the Beaques had scattered about the room. They would have been cut down like wheat.

'Just a warning,' the Gleg replied stonily. He seemed to have calmed down himself, now that his bloodlust was sated.

At this juncture the beribboned Gleg captain entered, glancing approvingly at the tattered body on the floor, then at the rest of us clustered against the wall. 'Everything under control, I see,' he observed.

'I wish to protest,' Trader said loudly.

The Gleg regarded him, eyes blinking slowly, somehow reptilian. 'Interesting,' he said. 'Even when civilisation collapses about him, the human species clings to his code of behaviour, unable to adapt. "I wish to protest",' he mimicked. He took a ponderous step forward. 'You can protest all you like, but you are obliged to obey. And if you obey, you might even survive. You may all survive,' he added, glancing at the Beaques with distaste.

'What do you want us to do?' asked Trader.

'Come with me.' The Gleg turned and left the observation room followed by his colleague. They didn't look back; they assumed we would follow. And we followed; Trader, myself, and Bo, the latter moving as if in a trance. Once in the corridor, the Gleg guard locked the door on the Beaques.

So the Beaques were free to go; out through the air-lock by which they had entered and away in their ship. I wondered how far they would get without supplies. Then I thought of something else.

'I understood you were activating the defences,' I remarked coldly to Trader. 'How did this crowd get in?'

'We didn't have time,' he muttered. 'Anyway, it seems we're going to have to reorganise the defences, if we ever come through this. They arrived through the back door, as it were. Bo didn't have time to break his bodies out of the cabinets, either . . .' His voice hardened. 'You were supposed to be on watch,' he snarled, remembering.

I could see no purpose in prolonging the discussion. We were now descending the auxiliary cargo hatch into the enemy ship. Even now, when I had plenty on my mind, I was struck once again by the strangeness of the sensation; the disorientation which is felt on entering a moored ship.

Because the hatch is in the deck of the Post, a huge square opening in the steel floor which forms the rim of the wheel-shaped station, you climb *down* the ladder, assisted by the centrifugal force of the Post's spin. But as soon as you enter the hatch in the belly of the ship tightly clamped against the rim of the Post, *down* becomes *up*, gravity in smaller ships being effected by a central artificial gravity unit with horizontal field windings under the deck, giving a constant effect of normal gravity throughout the ship.

However, normal gravity is a matter of opinion, and after a complicated half-way manoeuvre to get the right way up, I had great difficulty in dragging myself into the alien ship. Gleg gravity is almost twice that of Earth.

We staggered painfully across the deck of the Gleg ship – Bo, having no skeleton, in particular trouble – and assembled in a large room surrounded by the entire ship's crew of Glegs with blasters at the ready. They were taking no chances. In the centre of the room was a low table, Gleg-height – about three feet from the deck – and bolted down securely. No doubt Gleg ships are forced to perform tight astrobatics on occasion.

On the table was a familiar object.

'I want to know what that is,' said the Gleg captain, indicating the black stove-enamelled box, two foot by one, from which protruded, suggestively, the red button.

[redacted]

They thought it might be a bomb, of course.

'There were many of these among your cargo,' stated the alien. 'Now, I understand the human mentality. You are not, I believe, averse to endangering yourselves personally, but you will not endanger your friends, much less permit them to be killed by your own actions. You have a thing which you call team spirit. Laughable, but useful in this case . . .

'You.' He pointed at me. 'What is this machine?'

'I don't know,' I answered truthfully.

'But we found one dismantled in your station. Obviously you know what it is.'

Beside me the figure of Bo stirred imperceptibly and I glanced at him, noting the alert appearance of his eye. He was fully in control of himself again, so presumably loading of the cargo hulks had ceased. He was now concentrating all his faculties on the business in hand.

'We dismantled the machine to try to establish its purpose, but you interrupted us before we found out,' I explained. 'We were curious, ourselves.'

'I don't believe you,' said the Gleg flatly. 'You are lying.'

'Why should I lie?'

'To prevent me knowing the purpose of an obviously advanced machine, or alternatively to allow me to depart with a lethal cargo of unknown destructiveness.'

'I tell you, I don't know what it is,' I repeated desperately. The Gleg was fingering his blaster in ominous fashion.

'Right,' he said after a pause. 'I thought you'd say that. Well, we'll try my little experiment. Now, bearing in mind that your companions are all here, within range, as it were – apart from those other big brutes who loaded the cargo ships, and we're in constant radio link with their guards – bearing all this in mind, I want to see you press that button.'

'Why didn't you ask me in the first place?' I replied. I stretched out for the box. Nothing had happened the last time. I reached for the button.

'Wait!'

A thick tentacle whipped across my arm, restraining. Bo-8 pulled me away. 'When I say "now", get under the table quickly,' he murmured in English. 'Tell Trader.'

'So it is a bomb,' remarked the Gleg captain in Galingua, smugly, misinterpreting Bo's action and not understanding his quiet instructions to me.

Bo replied in the same language, 'I don't think any race would be stupid enough to manufacture a bomb with a button which immediately detonated it, would you?'

'So *you* press the button, wise guy,' commanded the Gleg, 'and we'll just wait and see what happens. If it's a time bomb, I expect you know the interval, and I'm sure your nerve will crack before ours. If it's not a bomb, we'll be interested to see the result.'

It was a tense situation, but I had great confidence in our multibodied alien. He alone knew, or thought he knew, what the machine was; he had said as much before we were inter-

rupted by the Gleg invasion. He seemed to have the situation under control, although I couldn't quite see how he expected the metal table to save us from the blast, or whatever happened. Nevertheless, I whispered his message to Trader, who looked bewildered.

Bo allowed himself to sag, as if defeated. His two lower limbs slid below the table; two more gripped the edge, the fifth poised over the button.

'Now!' he yelled.

Trader and I dived under the table hearing, for a brief instant, the sizzling of blasters behind us. Then all hell broke loose.

I left the deck abruptly, bodily, and slammed into the underside of the table, falling upwards, it seemed, Trader yelling in alarm beside me. Around the cabin I heard the solid thuds of flesh against steel and short, grunting screams of agony. I couldn't see what was happening but the room, which seemed to be upside down, was in an uproar; the screams now being joined by the rending of tearing metalwork and heavy crashes of tumbling steel.

After a brief pause I heard Bo's voice,

'And again, you bastards!'

I left the underside of the table and smashed back to the deck while all around me the sounds of falling bodies were repeated; but this time there were few screams. I heard Trader Jack cursing quietly to himself as he removed my elbow from some delicate portion of his anatomy.

'That'll do. You can come out now,' called Bo-8.

I opened my eyes which, I realised, had been tightly closed for some seconds. I saw the solid deck beneath me, the heavy bolts securing the table leg to the floor. I crawled out and helped Trader Jack to his feet. Staring around the room, I saw the smashed bodies of a number of Glegs. There was a great deal of blood splashed about the metalwork.

'What the hell happened?' I asked Bo-8 weakly.

Then I was suddenly, violently sick.

The Beaques had departed, twittering profuse thanks and insincere promises to repay, with handsome interest, the stores which we had loaded onto their ship. I've met these avian races before; there's something unstable about their make-up and they are well-known for a completely amoral outlook on life. They will cling, grovelling, to your knees while they lift the very watch from your pocket. If we hadn't given them the stores they would have stayed, leaving us with the alternative of killing them or feeding them.

'Never mind, Trader,' I said, as we sat in the observation room recovering from the depredations wrought by the demanding Beaques. 'The Krax will be here in a week's time to collect the power units, and that'll be the end of the matter.'

We were waiting for Bo-8, who was ministering to the wounds he had sustained in the brief skirmish aboard the Gleg ship. As soon as the Gleg had realised that he was up to no good with the button of the power unit, they had cut loose with their blasters and burned away a few cubic inches of flesh. Fortunately for Bo, they didn't have much time.

The door opened and Bo cartwheeled in, looking remarkably fit.

'Rapid recovery,' I observed.

'By no means,' replied Bo irritably. 'You humans always judge others by your own inefficient standards. I am in extreme pain and my injured body is in my medicabinet, receiving attention. I may have to reproduce.'

One day I would get used to Bo's proliferation of bodies. He could reproduce by cell division and the only limiting factor to his fecundity was his brain's capacity to control. He would have filled the Post with bodies if his mind could have stood the strain.

'Never mind about that,' cut in Trader hastily, no doubt fearing that Bo would renew his claims for pay pro rata according to the number of his bodies. 'Tell us about the power units.'

'Yes, what happened in the Gleg ship?' I asked. What with getting the Beaques loaded up and on their way, I hadn't had a chance to figure things out, yet.

Bo chuckled, a supreme chuckle of superior knowledge. He sat down, lolling comfortably and caressing the brain box on the table.

'It's all quite simple, once you've grasped the fact that the little Bernadian machine is a simple, but vastly miniaturised, anti-gravity unit. I might add that *I* grasped that fact as soon as we opened it.'

'No wonder the Bernadians were cagy,' I said in awe. 'A device like this will revolutionise personal transport; cars will be obsolete from now on. And that's only one use.'

'There are hundreds of uses,' said Bo. 'Building and civil engineering, for one. No need for massive cranes, with these. As regards interplanetary transport, they're a tremendous advance on those old antigrav units on Vega, and Earth too, which need a huge power unit to make an interplanetary hop. I imagine the Bernadians are supplying them to the Krax for development; Krax being a heavy planet, it would make a good testing ground.'

'Why didn't the unit work when we first tried it?' asked Trader.

'No gravity for it to react against. We're centrifugal, remember. But artificial gravity units, like on the Gleg ship, create artificial mass. Now, you recall the sockets on the Bernadian unit?'

'Directional control output sockets, you said.'

'Yes, and without the directional control fittings the unit is, naturally, uncontrolled. It sends out a strong, but useless, antigrav field in all directions . . .

'So when I pressed the button it nullified the Gleg gravity unit. The ship was clamped to the Post and spinning with it. So, impelled by centrifugal force, the Glegs left the deck and smashed into the ceiling. We, being under the table, didn't have so far to fall. Then I released the button, their gravity unit cut in again, and down they all came. Hard.' He chuckled grimly.

'I suppose you pulled a simultaneous stunt in each of the other ships,' I said. 'No wonder you helped them with the loading. You wanted to be everywhere at once.'

'My physical make-up is extremely advanced,' replied Bo proudly.

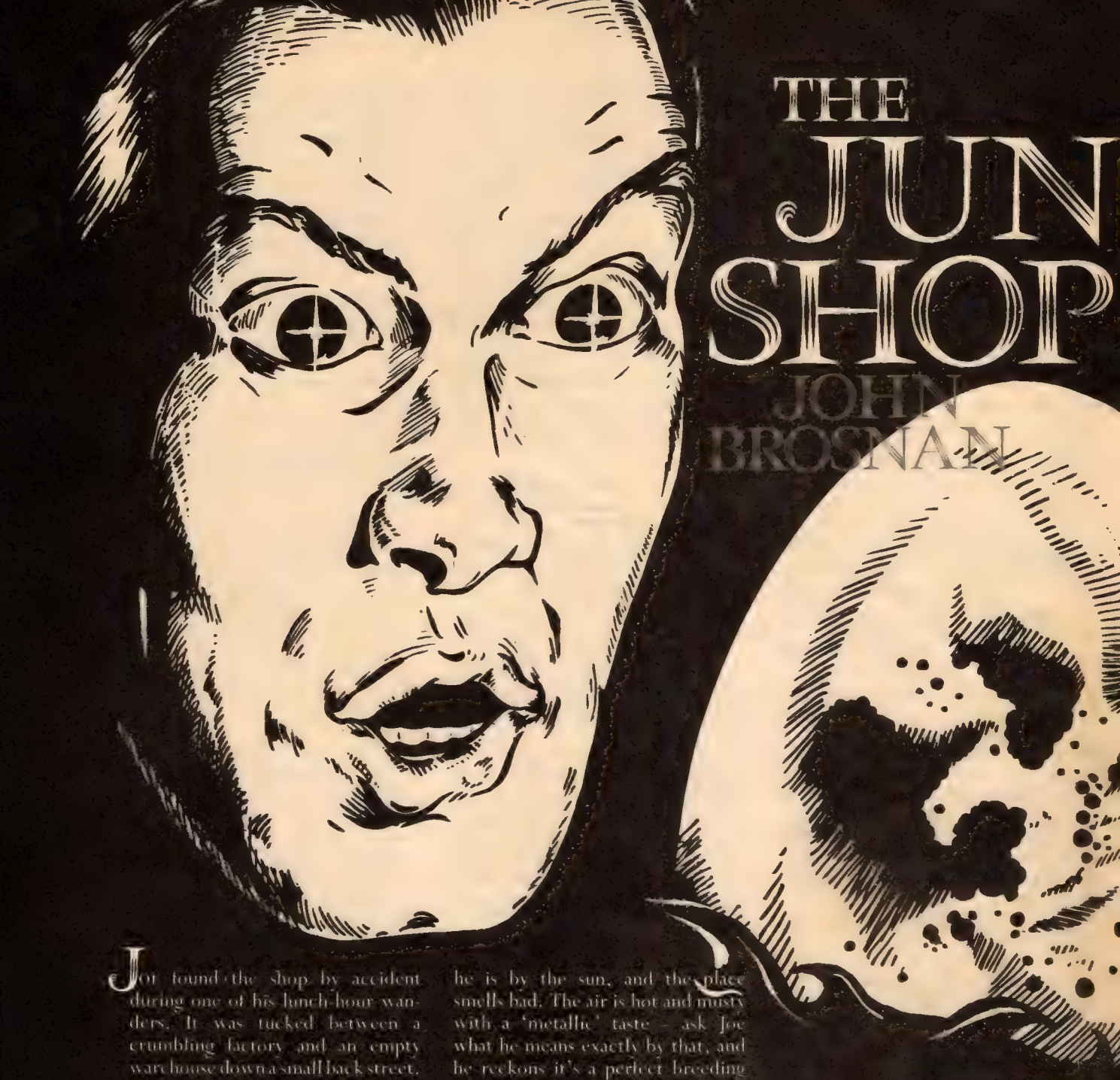
This was too much for Trader. He snorted with vexation and tapped out his pipe on the brain-box, making Bo wince. 'Pity you couldn't have solved the problem of those damned Beaques,' he remarked acidly. 'They've cost us thousands.'

'Ah, yes,' Bo murmured. 'The Beaques. But for one thing, I would have recommended your sending them on their way without supplies. You see, my race is not shackled by emotions, as yours is. We have no compassion. However, even space flotsam like the Beaques deserve to be repaid for services rendered.'

'Services rendered?'

'They led the Gleg here. We've got that to thank them for. And thanks to the Gleg, we're richer by four well-found modern ships, all neatly moored to the perimeter of the Post. After all, who's going to claim them?'

'Who's going to claim them?' echoed Trader and, deep in his beard, I detected the beginnings of a slow grin of delighted greed. He rubbed his hands together, gently.



THE JUNK SHOP

JOHN BROSNAN

Joe found the shop by accident during one of his lunch-hour wanders. It was tucked between a crumbling factory and an empty warehouse down a small back street. If you ask him just exactly where it was he won't be able to tell you, though he knows it was somewhere near the railway yards. It wasn't what you'd call a proper shop, Joe says; there was no display window or anything, it was really nothing more than a shed.

Anyway, Joe pauses when he comes to it and peers in. He can't see much because the sun is pretty bright that day and it's dark inside, but he does spot a sign on a table near the door that has JUNK written on it. Now Joe, as you know, loves poking around in junk shops and their like, so inside he goes. He still can't see anything, dazzled as he is by the sun, and the place smells bad. The air is hot and musty with a 'metallic' taste – ask Joe what he means exactly by that, and he reckons it's a perfect breeding ground for one of his headaches. But he decides he will have a quick look round, and when his eyes have finally adjusted to the dark he begins to sniff about.

The stock, if you can call it that, is laid out on two rows of long narrow tables that stretch all the way to the back of the shop. At first, nothing looks promising to Joe, in fact he can't even recognise any of it; but that doesn't surprise him as he reckons that the most common objects look strange when removed from their usual surroundings. As he's picking up a twisted piece of metal, and wondering whether it had come from the inside of a jet engine or a washing machine, he's suddenly aware that there's someone standing beside him. Startled he turns and sees an old man dressed in dirty overalls.

Presuming him to be the owner of the place, which he was, Joe smiles and says, 'Just having a look around. Ok to, isn't it?'

'Sure,' says the old man, 'look as much as you want.'

He's an odd-looking coot according to Joe. Yellowish skin, you know, jaundice-like, and eyes a bright orange colour. Well, you ask Joe yourself then. Anyway, Joe doesn't like the look of him

JOHN HIGGINS

and hopes that he'll disappear. He reckons that being watched takes all the fun out of browsing.

'I'll be out back,' says the old man. 'Give a yell if you find something you want,' and he moves off. Feeling happier, Joe continues with his poking and a couple of minutes later comes across something that interests him. It's an egg-shaped sphere about nine inches in diameter and made out of clear glass or something. As if by magic, and Joe's got his own ideas on that, the old man is back beside him and looking eager. Joe is so surprised he almost drops the thing.

'Like it?' asks the old man.

'Oh, I dunno,' Joe says, 'what is it? Not one of your crystal ball things is it?'

'Nah,' says the old one. 'It's what you might call a novelty item. Look into it hard.'

Joe does so. He discovers that it has a patch of glowing mist in the centre.

'Watch,' says the old man.

Joe watches and finds that the patch of mist is shrinking. It gets smaller and smaller until he can't see it anymore. Then there's a bright flash of light and the spot of mist has re-appeared only this time it's getting bigger.

'What is it?' Joe asks again.

'The universe,' says the old man.

'Oh,' says Joe. He thinks a bit. 'Sort of clever really. Like one of those Christmas scenes for the kids, you shake them up and it looks as if it's snowing inside.'

'Nah,' says the old man, 'this is the real thing. What you're holding is your actual universe.'

'You're pulling my leg,' says Joe, 'how could anyone fit the whole universe into a glass egg this size?'

'I dunno,' says the old man. 'Suppose it's like putting a ship inside a bottle. Used to be a hobby of one of my ancestors. Wouldn't have a clue how he did it.'

'But how can we be standing here holding the universe?' asks Joe. 'Shouldn't we be inside the egg too?'

'We are, or we will be, or we were, I'm not sure which. Vastly different time scale, as is obvious by the fact that you can actually see the universe pulsate. As we talk, billions of years are passing inside the egg.'

'Hmmm,' says Joe.

'Well, do you want it? Make a marvellous curiosity piece for your living-room. Looks really spectacular if you put the lights out.'

'I don't want you to get the wrong idea,' says Joe, 'but I'm afraid I find it all hard to swallow. Can you prove that this is the real universe?'

The old man sighs. 'Sure,' he says, 'just look into my eyes.'

'Well . . . ' says Joe, and begins to back away.

'Look,' says the old man again. So Joe, just to humour him, looks into the old geezer's funny orange eyes and suddenly he *knows*, just *knows*, but don't ask him to explain how, that he has been telling him the truth.

'Christ!' says Joe. 'Those were some ancestors you had!'

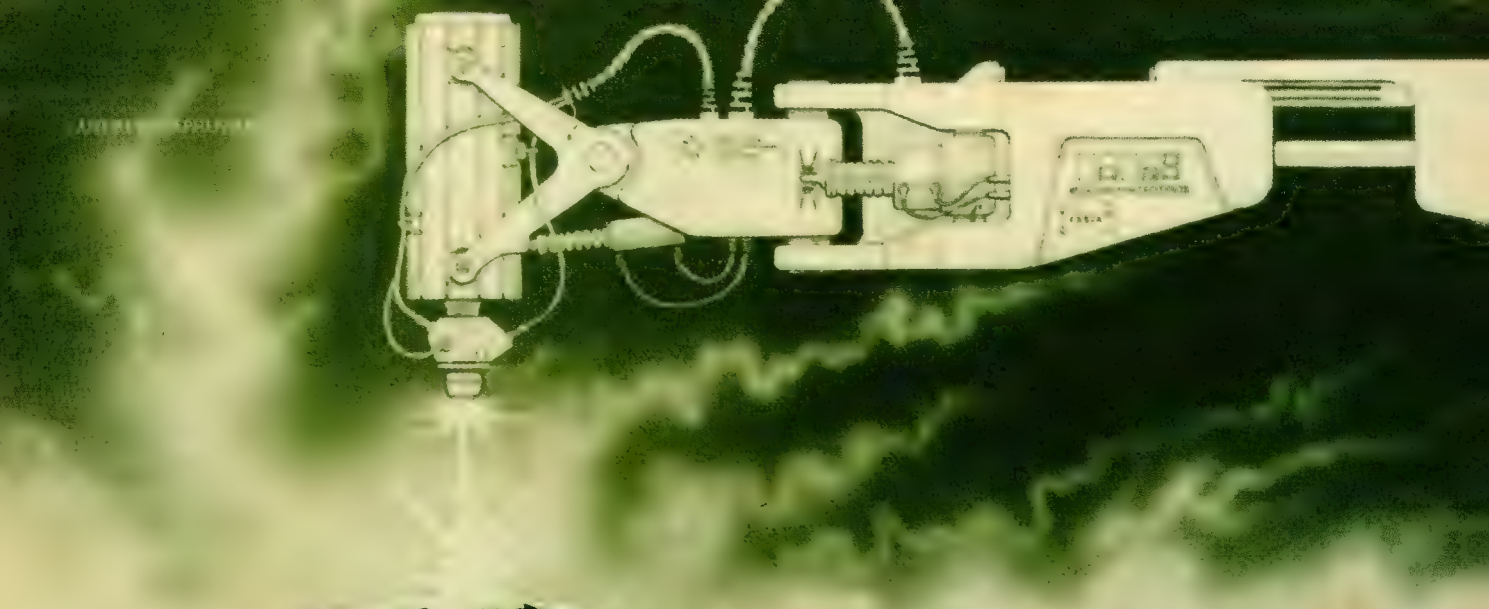
The old guy gives an apologetic smile and shrugs his shoulders, 'But as you can see, I myself have fallen upon hard times . . . '

Joe looks at the egg again. 'Christ,' he mutters, 'the actual universe.' Then a thought strikes him. 'Hey, how much do you want for it?'

The old man pauses. 'How about a dollar fifty?' he says.

Joe shakes his head and sadly puts the egg back down on the table.

'Just what I thought,' he says, 'too much. What else have you got?'



ROBERT SILVERBERG

IN THE HOUSE

Now they bring in the new ones, this spring's crop of 10 year olds – six boys, six girls – and leave them with me in the dormitory room that will be their home for the next dozen years. The room is bare, austere, with black slate floors and rough brick walls, furnished for the time being with cots and clothes-cabinets and little more. The air is chill, and the children, who are naked, huddle in discomfort.

'I am Sister Mimise,' I tell them. 'I will be your guide and counsellor in the first twelve months of your new life in the House of Double Minds.'

I have lived in this place for eight years, since I was 14, and this is the fifth year that I have had charge of the new children. If I had not been disqualified by my left-handedness, this is the year I would have been graduated into full oraclehood, but I try not to dwell on that. Caring for the children is a rewarding task in itself. They arrive scrawny and frightened, and slowly they unfold: they blossom; they ripen; they grow toward their destinies. Each year there is some special one for me, some favourite, in whom I take particular joy. In my first group, four years ago, it was long-legged laughing Jen, she who is now my lover. A year later it was soft beautiful Jali, and then Timas, who I thought would become one of the greatest of all oracles:

but after two years of training Timas cracked and was culled. And last year bright-eyed Runild, impish Runild, my pet, my darling boy, more gifted even than Timas and, I fear, even less stable. I look at the new ones, wondering who will be special among them for me this year.

The children are pale, slender, uneasy; their thin nude bodies look more than naked because of their shaven skulls. As a result of what has been done to their brains they move clumsily today. Their left arms often dangle as though they have entirely forgotten them, and they tend to walk in a shuffling sideways motion, dragging their left legs a little. These problems will soon disappear. The last of the operations in this group was performed only two days ago, on the short wide-shouldered girl whose breasts have already begun to grow. I can see the narrow red line marking the place where the surgeon's beam sliced through her scalp to sever the hemispheres of her brain.

'You have been selected,' I say in a resonant formal tone, 'for the highest and most sacred office in our society. From this moment until you reach adulthood your lives and energies will be consecrated to the purpose of attaining the skills and wisdom an oracle must have. I congratulate you on having come so far.'

And I envy you.

I do not say that part aloud.

I feel envy and pity both. I have seen the children come and go, come and go. Out of each year's dozen, one or two usually die along the way of natural causes or accidents. At least three go insane under the terrible pressure of the disciplines and have to be culled. So only about half the group is likely to complete the twelve years of training, and most of those will prove to have little value as oracles. The useless ones will be allowed to remain, of course, but their lives will be meaningless. The House of Double Minds has been in existence for more than a century; there are at present just one hundred and forty-two oracles in residence – seventy-seven women and sixty-five men – of whom all but about forty are mere drones. A thin harvest out of some twelve hundred novices since the beginning.

These children have never met before. I call upon them to introduce themselves. They give their names in low self-conscious voices, eyes downcast.

A boy named Divvan asks, 'Will we wear clothes soon?'

Their nakedness disturbs them. They hold their thighs together and stand at odd storklike angles, keeping apart from one another, trying to conceal their undeveloped loins. They do this because they are strangers. They will forget their shame before long. As the months pass they will become closer than brothers and sisters.

'Robes will be issued this afternoon,' I tell him. 'But clothing ought not to be important here, and you need have no reason to wish to hide your bodies.' Last year when this same point arose – it always does – the mischievous boy Runild suggested that I remove my own robe as a gesture of solidarity. Of course I did, but it was a mistake: the sight of a mature woman's body was more troubling to them than even their own bareness.

Now it is the time for the first exercises, so that they may learn the ways in which the brain operation has altered the responses of their bodies. At random I choose a girl named Hirole and ask her to step forward, while the rest form a circle around her. She is tall and fragile-looking and it must be torment to her to be aware of the eyes of all the others upon her.

Smiling, I say gently, 'Raise your hand, Hirole.'

She raises one hand.

'Bend your knee.'

As she flexes her knee, there is an interruption. A wiry naked boy scrambles into the room, fast as a spider, wild as a monkey, and bursts into the middle of the circle, shouldering Hirole aside. Runild again! He is a strange and moody and extraordinarily intelligent child, who, now that he is in his second year at the House, has lately been behaving in a reckless, unpredictable way. He runs around the circle, seizing several of the new children briefly, putting his face close to theirs, staring with crazy intensity into their eyes. They are terrified of him. For a moment I am too astonished to move. Then I go to him and seize him.

He struggles ferociously. He spits at me, hisses, claws my arms, makes thick wordless grunting sounds. Gradually I get control of him. In a low voice I say, 'What's wrong with you, Runild? You know you aren't supposed to be in here!'

'Let me go.'

'Do you want me to report this to Brother Sleel?'

'I just want to see the new ones.'

'You're frightening them. You'll be able to meet them in a few days, but you're not allowed to upset them now.' I pull him toward the door. He continues to resist and nearly breaks free. Eleven-year-old boys are amazingly strong, sometimes. He kicks my thigh savagely: I will have purple bruises tonight. He tries to bite my arm. Somehow I get him out of the room, and in the corridor he suddenly goes slack and begins to tremble, as though he has had a fit that is now over. I am trembling too. Hoarsely I say, 'What's happening to you, Runild? Do you want to be culled the way Timas and Jurda were? You can't keep doing things like this! You . . .'

He looks up at me, wild-eyed, and starts to say something, and stifles it, and turns and bolts. In a moment he is gone, a brown naked streak vanishing down the hallway. I feel a great sadness: Runild was a favourite of mine, and now he is going insane, and they will have to cull him. I should report the incident immediately, but I am unable to bring myself to do it, and, telling myself that my responsibility lies with the new ones, I return to the dorm room.

'Well!' I say briskly, as if nothing unusual has happened. 'He's certainly playful today, isn't he! That was Runild. He's a year ahead of you. You'll meet him and the rest of his group a little later. Now, Hirole . . .'

The children, preoccupied with their own altered state, quickly grow calm; they seem much less distressed by Runild's intrusion than I am. Shakily I begin again, asking Hirole to raise a hand, to flex a knee, to close an eye. I thank her and call a boy named Mulliam into the centre of the circle. I ask him to raise one shoulder above the other, to touch his hand to his cheek, to make a fist. Then I pick a girl named Fyme and instruct her to hop on one foot, put an arm behind her back, to kick one leg in the air.

I say, 'Who can tell me one thing that was true of every response?'

Several of them answer at once, 'It was always the right side! The right eye, the right hand, the right leg . . .'

'Correct.' I turn to a small dark-visaged boy named Bloss and ask, 'Why is that? Do you think it's just coincidence?'

'Well,' he says, 'everybody here is right-handed, because left-handers aren't allowed to become oracles, and so everybody tended to use the side that he . . .'

Bloss falters, seeing heads shaking all around the circle.

Galaine, the girl whose breasts have begun to sprout, says, 'It's because of the operation! The right side of our brains doesn't understand words very well, and it's the Right that controls the left side of the body, so when you tell us in words to do something, only our Left understands and moves the muscles it controls. It gets the jump on the Right because the Right can't speak or be spoken to.'

'Very good, Galaine. That's it exactly.'

I let it sink in. Now that the connections between the two halves of their brains have been cut, the Rights of these children are isolated, unable to draw on the skills of the language centre in the Left. They are only now realising what it means to have half a brain rendered illiterate and inarticulate, to have their Left respond as though it is the entire brain, activating only the muscles it controls most directly.

Fyme says, 'Does that mean we won't ever be able to use our left sides again?'

'Not at all. Your Right isn't paralysed or helpless. It just isn't very good at using words. So your Left is quicker to react when I give a verbal instruction. But if the instruction isn't phrased in words, the Right will be able to take control and respond.'

'How can you give an instruction that isn't in words?' Mulliam asks.

'In many ways,' I say. 'I could draw a

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picture, or make a gesture, or use some sort of symbol. I'll show you what I mean by going through the exercises again. Sometimes I'll give the instructions in words, and sometimes by acting them out. When I do that, imitate what you see. Is that clear?'

I wait a moment to allow the sluggish word-skills of their Rights to grasp the scheme.

Then I say, 'Raise a hand.'

They lift their right arms. When I tell them to bend a knee, they bend their right knees. But when I wordlessly close my left eye, they imitate me and close their left eyes. Their Rights are able to exert muscular control in a normal way when the instructions are delivered non-verbally; but when I use words, the Left alone perceives and acts.

I test the ability of their Lefts to override the normal motor functions of their Rights by instructing them verbally to raise their left shoulders. Their Rights, baffled by my words, take no action, forcing their Lefts to reach beyond a Left's usual sphere of dominance. Slowly, with great difficulty, a few of the children manage to raise their left shoulders. Some can manage only a mere twitch. Fyme, Bloss, and Mulliam, with signs of struggle evident on their faces, are unable to budge their left shoulders at all. I tell the entire group to relax, and the children collapse in relief, sprawling on their cots. There is nothing to worry about, I say. In time they will all regain full motor functions in both halves of their bodies. Unless they are driven insane by the split-brain phenomena, that is, but no need to tell them that.

'One more demonstration for today,' I announce. This one will show them in another way how thoroughly the separation of the hemispheres affects the mental processes. I ask Gybold, the smallest of the boys, to seat himself at the testing table at the far end of the room. There is a screen mounted on the table; I tell Gybold to fix his eyes on the centre of the screen, and I flash a picture of a banana on the left side of the screen for a fraction of a second.

'What do you see, Gybold?'

'I don't see anything, Sister Mimise,' he replies, and the other children gasp. But the 'I' that is speaking is merely Gybold's Left, which gets its visual information through his right eye; that eye did indeed see nothing. Meanwhile Gybold's Right is answering my question in the only way it can: the boy's left hand gropes among several objects lying on the table hidden behind the screen, finds the banana that is there, and triumphantly holds it up. Through sight and touch Gybold's Right has prevailed over its wordlessness.

'Excellent,' I say. I take the banana from him and, drawing his left hand behind the screen where he is unable to see it, I put a drinking-glass into it. I ask him to name the object in his hand.

'An apple?' he ventures. I frown, and quickly he says, 'An egg? A pencil?'

The children laugh. Mulliam says, 'He's just guessing!'

'Yes, he is. But which part of Gybold's brain is making the guesses?'

'His Left,' Galaine cries. 'But it's the Right that knows it's holding a glass.'

They all shush her for giving away the secret. Gybold pulls his hand out from under the screen and stares at the glass, silently forming its name with his lips.

I put Herik, Chith, Simi, and Clane through related experiments. Always the results are the same. If I flash a picture to the right eye or put an object in the right hand, the children respond normally, correctly naming it. But if I transmit information only to the left eye or the left hand, they are unable to use words to describe the objects their Rights see or feel.

It is enough for now. The children are silent and have withdrawn into individual spheres of privacy. I know that they are working things out within their minds, performing small self-devised experiments, testing themselves, trying to learn the full extent of the changes the operation has brought about. They glance from one hand to another, flex fingers, whisper little calculations. They should not be allowed to look inward so much, not at the beginning. I take them to the storeroom to receive their new clothing, the simple grey monastic robes that we wear to set us apart from the ordinary people of the city. Then I turn them free, sending them romping into the broad fields of soft green grass behind the dormitory, to relax and play. They may be oracles in the making, but they are also, after all, 10-year-old children.

It is my afternoon rest period. On my way through the dark cool corridors to my chamber I am stopped by Brother Sleel, one of the senior oracles. He is a white-haired man, tall and of powerful build, and his blue eyes work almost independently of one another, constantly scanning his surroundings in restless separate searches. Sleel has never been anything but warm and kind to me, and yet I have always been afraid of him, I suppose more out of awe for his office than out of fear for the man himself. Really I feel timid with all the oracles, knowing that their minds work differently from mine and that they see things in me that I may not see myself. Sleel says, 'I saw you having difficulties with Runild in the hall this morning. What was happening?'

'He wandered into my orientation meeting. I asked him to leave.'

'What was he doing?'

'He said he wanted to see the new children. But of course I couldn't let him bother them.'

'And he started to fight with you?'

'He made some trouble. Nothing much.'

'He was fighting with you, Mimise.'

'He was rather unruly,' I admit.

Sleel's left eye stares into mine. I feel a chill. It is the oracle-eye, the all-seeing one. Quietly he says, 'I saw you fighting with him.'

I look away from him. I study my bare feet. 'He wouldn't leave. He was frightening the new ones. When I tried to lead him from the room he jumped at me, yes. But he didn't hurt me and it was all over in a moment. Runild is high-spirited, Brother.'

'Runild is a troubled child,' Sleel says heavily. 'He is disturbed. He is becoming wild, like a beast.'

'No, Brother Sleel.' How can I face that terrible eye? 'He has extraordinary gifts. You know – surely *you* must know – that it takes time for one like him to settle down, to come to terms with . . .'

'I've had complaints from his counsellor, Voree. She says she hardly knows how to handle him.'

'It's only a phase. Voree's had responsibility for him only a couple of weeks. As soon as she . . .'

'I know you want to protect him, Mimise. But don't let your love for the boy cloud your judgement. I think this is Timas happening all over again. It's an old, old pattern here, the brilliant novice who is unable to cope with his changes, who . . .'

'Are you going to cull him?' I blurt.

Sleel smiles. He takes both my hands in his. I am engulfed by his strength, by his wisdom, by his power. I sense the unfathomable flow of perception from his mystic Right to his calm, analytic Left. He says, 'If Runild gets any worse, I'll have to. But I want to save him. I like the boy. I respect his potential. What do you suggest we do, Mimise?'

'What do *I* . . .'

'Tell me. Advise me.'

The senior oracle is playing a little game with me, I suppose. Shrugging, I say, 'Obviously Runild's trying to gain attention through all these crazy pranks. Let's try to reach him and find out what he really wants, and perhaps there'll be some way we can give it to him. I'll speak to Voree. I'll talk to his sister, Kitrin. And tomorrow I'll talk to Runild. I think he trusts me. We were very close last year, Runild and I.'

'I know,' Sleel says gently. 'Very well: see what you can do.'

Still later that afternoon, as I cross the central courtyard, Runild erupts from the second-year house and rushes up to me. His face is flushed; his bare chest is shiny with sweat. He clings to me, pulls me down to his height, looks me in the eye. His eyes have already begun to stray a little; one day they may be like Sleel's.

I think he wants to apologise for his invasion of my group. But all he manages to say is; 'I am sorry for you. You wanted so much to be one of us.' And he runs off.

To be one of them. Yes. Who does not long to dwell in the House of Double Minds, living apart from the noise and chaos of the world, devoting oneself to oracular contemplation and the service of mankind? My mother's father's sister was of that high company, and in early girlhood I was taken to visit her. How awesome it was to stand in the presence of her all-knowing Right, to feel the flood of warmth and understanding that emanated from her wise eyes. It was my dream to join her here, a dream doubly thwarted, for she died when I was 8, and by then the fact of my left-handedness was irremediably established.

Left-handers are never selected to undergo the oracle-making operation. The two halves of our brains are too symmetrical, too ambidextrous: we have speech centres on both sides, most of us left-handers, and so we are not likely to develop those imbalances of cerebral powers that oracles must have. Right-handers, too, are born with symmetrically functioning brains, each hemisphere developing independently and duplicating the operations of the other. But by the time they are 2 years

old, their Lefts and Rights are linked in a way that gives them a shared pool of skills, and therefore each half is free to develop its own special capabilities, since the gifts of one half are instantly available to the other.

At the age of 10 this specialising process is complete. Language, sequential thought, all the analytic and rational functions, centre in the Left. Special perception, artistic vision, musical skill, emotional insight, centre in the Right. The brain's left side is the scientist, the architect, the general, the mathematician. The brain's right side is the minstrel, the sculptor, the visionary, the dreamer. Normally the two halves operate as one. The Right experiences a flash of poetic intuition, the Left clothes it in words. The Right sees a pattern of fundamental connections, the Left expresses it in a sequence of theorems. The Right conceives the shape of a symphony, the Left sets the notes down on paper. Where there is true harmony between the hemispheres of the brain, works of genius are created.

Too often, though, one side seizes command. Perhaps the Right becomes dominant, and we have a dancer, an athlete, an artist, who has trouble with words, who is inexpressive and inarticulate except through some nonverbal medium. More often, because we are a word-worshipping people, it is the Left that rules, choking the subordinate Right in a welter of verbal analysis and commentary, slowing and hindering the spontaneous intuitive perceptions of the mind. What society gains in orderliness and rationality it loses in vision and grace. We can do nothing about these imbalances – except to take advantage of their existence by accentuating and exploiting them.

And so the children come here, a dozen of our best each year, and our surgeons sever the isthmus of neural tissue that links Left and Right. Some kind of communication between the hemispheres continues to operate, since each half remains aware of what the other is immediately experiencing, if not of its accumulated memories and skills. But the Right is cut free from the tyranny of the word-intoxicated Left. The Left continues to operate its normal routines of reading and writing and conversation and computation, while the Right, now its own master, observes and registers and analyses in a way that has no need of words. Because its verbal skills are so feeble, the newly independent Right must find some other means of expression if it is to make its perceptions known: and, through the dozen years of training in the House of Double Minds, some of the children succeed in achieving this. They are able – I do not know how, no one who is not an oracle can ever know how – to transmit the unique insights of fully mature and wholly independent Rights to their Lefts, which can transmit them to the rest of us. It is a difficult and imperfect process; but it gives us access to levels of knowledge that few have ever reached before our time. Those who master that skill are our functional oracles. They dwell in realms of beauty and wisdom that, in the past, only saints and prophets and the greatest artists and a few madmen have reached.

I would, if I could, have entered those realms. But I came forth left-handed from the womb and my brain, though it is a decent one, therefore lacked the required asymmetry of function. If I could not be an oracle I could at least serve them, I decided. And thus I came here as a girl, and asked to be of use, and in time was given the important task of easing the new children into their new lives. So I have come to know Jen and Timas and Jalil and Runild and the others, some of whom will live to be among the most famous of oracles, and so now I welcome Hirole and Mulliam and Gybold and Galaine and their companions. And I am content, I think. I am content.

We gather in the main hall for the evening meal. My new group has not come before the older novices until now, and so my twelve undergo close scrutiny, which they find embarrassing, as I lead them to their place. Each year-group sits together at its own circular table. My dozen dine with me; at the table to my left is my group of last year, now in Voree's charge. Runild sits there with his back to me, and his mere presence creates a tension in me as if he is giving off an electric radiation. To my right is the third-year group, reduced now to nine by the culling of Timas and two deaths; the fourth-year children are just in front of me and the fifth-year ones, my darling Jen among them, at my rear. The older children are in the centre of the hall. Along the sides of the great room are the tables of the instructors, those who have daily care of the ordinary education of the twelve groups of novices, and the senior oracles occupy long tables at the hall's far end, beneath a panoply of gay red and green banners.

Sleel makes a brief speech of welcome for my twelve, and the meal is served.

I send Galaine to Voree's table with a note: *See me on the porch after dinner.*

My appetite is poor. I finish quickly, but I stay with my group until it is time to dismiss them. All the children troop off to the auditorium for a show. A warm drizzle is falling; Voree and I stand in the shelter of the eaves. She is much older than I am, a stocky woman with kinky orange hair. Year after year I pass my fledglings on to her. She is strong, efficient, stolid, insensitive. Runild baffles her. 'He's like a monkey,' she says. 'Running around naked, chattering to himself, singing crazy songs, playing pranks. He isn't doing his lessons. He isn't even doing his disciplines, half the time. I've warned him he'll be culled, but he doesn't seem to care.'

'What do you think he wants?'

'To have everyone notice him.'

'Yes, surely, but *why?*'

'Because he's a naturally mischievous boy,' Voree says, scowling. 'I've seen many of his sort before. They think rules are for other people. Two more weeks of this and I'll recommend a cull.'

'He's too brilliant to waste like that, Voree.'

'He's wasting himself. Without the disciplines how can he become an oracle? And he's upsetting all the others. My group's a shambles. Now he's bothering yours. He won't leave his sister alone either. Culling, Mimise, that's where he's heading. Culling.'

There is nothing to be gained from talking to Voree. I join my group in the auditorium.

Bedtime for the younger ones comes early. I see my children to their room; then I am free until midnight. I return to the auditorium, where the older children and the off-duty staff are relaxing, playing games, dancing, drifting off in couples. Kitrin, Runild's sister, is still there. I draw her aside. She is a slender, delicate girl of 14, a fifth-year novice. I am fond of her because she was in my very first group, but I have always found her shy, elusive, opaque. She is more so than ever now: I question her about her brother's behaviour and she answers me with shrugs, vague unfinished sentences, and artful evasions. Runild is wild? Well, of course, many boys are wild, she says, especially the bright ones. The disciplines seem to bore him. He's far ahead of his group – you know that, Mimise. And so on. I get nothing from her except the strong feeling that she is hiding something about her brother. My attempts to probe fail; Kitrin is still a child, but she is half-way to oraclehood, nearly, and that gives her an advantage over me in any duel of wits. Only when I suggest that Runild is in immediate peril of culling do I break through her defences.

'No!' she gasps, eyes widening in fear, cheeks turning pale. 'They mustn't! He has to stay! He's going to be greater than any of them!'

'He's causing too much trouble.'

'It's just a thing he's going through. He'll settle down, I promise you that.'

'Voree doesn't think so. She's going to request a cull.'

'No. No. What will happen to him if he's culled? He was *meant* to be an oracle. His whole life will have been thrown away. We have to save him, Mimise.'

'We can do that only if he can control himself.'

'I'll talk to him in the morning,' Kitrin says.

I wonder what she knows about Runild that she does not want to tell me.

At the evening's end I bring Jen to my chamber, as I do three or four nights a week. She is tall and supple and looks more than her 14 years. Her counsellor tells me she is moving well through her mid-novitiate and will be a splendid oracle. We lie together, lips to lips, breasts against breasts, and we stroke and caress and tickle one another, we smile with our eyes, we enter into all the rituals of love. Afterward, in the stillness that follows passion, she finds the bruise of this morning's struggle on my thigh and questions me with a frown. 'Runild,' I say. I tell her about his erratic behavior, about Sleel's uneasiness, about my conversation with Voree.

'They mustn't cull him,' Jen says solemnly. 'I know he's troublesome. But the path he's taking is so important for all of us.'

'Path? What path is that?'

'You don't know?'

'I know nothing, Jen.'

She catches her breath, rolls away, studies me a moment. At length she says, 'Runild sees into minds. When he puts his head very close to people, there's transmission. Without using words. It's . . . it's a kind of broadcast. His Right can

read the Rights of other oracles, the way you'd open a book and read it. If he could get close enough to Sleel, say, or any of them, he could read what's in their Rights.'

'What?'

'More, Mimise. His own Right talks to his Left the same way. He can transmit messages completely, quickly, making better contact between the halves than any of the oracles can do. He hasn't had the disciplines, even, and he has full access to his Right's perceptions. So whatever his Right sees, including what it gets from the Rights of others, can be transmitted to his Left and expressed in words more clearly even than Sleel himself can do it!'

'I don't believe this,' I say, barely comprehending.

'It's true! It's true, Mimise! He's only just learning how, and it gets him terribly excited, it makes him wild, don't you see, when all that contact comes flooding in? He can't quite handle it yet, which is why he acts so strangely. But once he gets his power under control . . .'

'How do you know anything about this, Jen?'

'Why, Kitrin told me.'

'Kitrin? I spoke to Kitrin and she never even hinted that . . .'

'Oh,' Jen says, looking pained. 'Oh. I guess I wasn't supposed to say. Not even to you, I guess. Oh, now I'll be in trouble with Kitrin, and . . .'

'You won't be. She doesn't need to know how I found out. But . . . Jen, Jen, can this be? Can anyone have such powers?'

'Runild does.'

'So he claims. Or Kitrin claims on his behalf.'

'No,' Jen says firmly. 'He *does*. They showed me, he and Kitrin. I felt him touch my mind. I felt him read me. He can read anyone. He can read *you*, Mimise.'

I must speak with Runild. But carefully, carefully, everything in its proper moment. In the morning I must first meet with my group and take them through the second-day exercises. These are designed to demonstrate that their Rights, although mute and presently isolated, are by no means inferior, and have perceptions and capabilities which in some ways are superior to those of their Lefts.

'Never think of your Right as a cripple,' I warn them. 'See it, rather, as some kind of extremely intelligent animal – an animal that is sharp-witted, quick to respond, imaginative, with only one flaw, that it has no vocabulary and is never going to be able to acquire more than a few simple words at best. Nobody pities a tiger or an eagle because it doesn't know how to speak. And there are ways of training tigers and eagles so that we can communicate with them without using words.'

I flash a picture of a house on the screen and ask the children to copy it, first using their left hands, then the right. Although they are all right-handed, they are unable to draw anything better than simple, crude two-dimensional representations with their right hands. The left-handed drawings, while shakily drawn because of their left arms' relatively backward muscular development and motor control, show a full understanding of the techniques of perspective. The right hand has the physical skill, but it is the left, drawing on the vision of the brain's right hemisphere, that has the artistic ability.

I ask them to arrange coloured plastic cubes to match an intricate pattern on the screen. Left-handed, they carry out the exercise swiftly and expertly. Right-handed, they become confused, frown and bite their lips, hold the cubes long moments without knowing where to put them down, eventually array the cubes in chaotic mazes. Clane and Bloss give up entirely in a minute or two; Mulliam perseveres grimly like one who is determined to climb a mountain too steep for his strength, but he accomplishes little; Luabet's left hand keeps darting across to do the task that is beyond the right's powers, as if she is at war with herself. She must keep the impatient left hand behind her back in order to proceed at all. No one can complete the block design correctly with the right hand, and when I allow the children to work with both hands the hands fight for control, the formerly dominant right one unable to accept its new inferiority and angrily slapping at the cubes the left one tries to put in place.

We go on to the split-screen exercises in facial recognition and pattern analysis, to the musical exercises, and the rest of the usual second-day routine. The children are fascinated by the case with which their Rights function in all but word-linked operations. Ordinarily I am delighted, too, to watch the newly liberated Rights come to life and assert their powers. But today I am impatient to be off to Runild and I give only perfunctory attention to my proper work.

At last the session ends. The children move off to the classroom where they will receive regular school-subject instruction. Runild's group, too, should be at school until noon. Possibly I can draw him aside after lunch. But, as though I have conjured him with a wish, I see him now, tumbling by himself in the meadow of crimson flowers by the auditorium. He sees me, too: halts in his gambol, winks, smiles, does a handspring, blows me a kiss. I go to him.

'Are you excused from classes this morning?' I ask, mock-stern.

'The flowers are so pretty,' he replies.

'The flowers will be just as pretty after school.'

'Oh, don't be so stuffy, Mimise! I know my lessons. I'm a clever boy.'

'Perhaps too clever, Runild.'

He grins. I do not frighten him. He seems to be patronising me; he appears to be at once very much younger and very much wiser than his years. I take him gently by the wrist and draw him down, easily, until we are sprawled side by side in the grass. He plucks a flower for me. His look is flirtatious. I accept both the flower and the look and respond with a warm smile; I am flirtatious myself. No doubt of his charm; and I can never win him by acting as an authority-figure, only as a conspirator. There was always an underlying sexuality in our relationship, incestuous, as if I were an older sister.

We talk in banter, teasing each other. Then I say, 'Something mysterious has been happening to you lately, Runild. I know that. Share your mystery with me.'

At first he denies all. He pretends innocence, but lets me know it is only pretence. His sly smile betrays him. He speaks in cryptic ellipses, hinting at arcane knowledge and defying me to pry details from him. I play his game, acting now intrigued, now eager, now sceptical, now wholly uninterested: we are stalking one another, and both of us know it. His oracle-eye pierces me. He toys with me with such subtlety that I must remind myself, with a glance at his slim hairless body, that I am dealing with a child. I ought never forget that he is only 11. Finally I press directly once more, asking him outright what strange new gift he is cultivating.

'Wouldn't you like to know!' he cries, and pulls an outrageous face, and dashes away.

But he comes back. We talk on a more serious level. He admits that he has discovered, these past few months, that he is different from the other children and from the senior oracles, that he has a talent, a power. It disturbs and exalts him both. He is still exploring the scope of it. He will not describe the power in any specific way. Of course I know from Jen its nature, but I prefer not to reveal that. 'Will you ever tell me?' I ask.

'Not today,' he says.

Gradually I win his trust. We meet casually, in corridors or courtyards, and exchange easy pleasantries, the sort I might trade with any of my former charges. He is testing me, seeing whether I am a friend or simply Sleel's spy. I let him know of my concern for him. I let him know that his eccentric behaviour has placed him in jeopardy of culling.

'I suppose so,' he says gloomily. 'But what can I do? I'm not like the others. I can't sit still for long. Things are jumping inside my head all the time. Why should I bother with arithmetic when I can . . .'

He halts, suddenly guarded again.

'When you can what, Runild?'

'*You* know.'

'I don't.'

'You will. Soon enough.'

There are days when he seems calm. But his pranks have not ended. He finds poor Sister Sestoine, one of the oldest and dimmest of the oracles, and puts his forehead against hers and does something to her that sends her into an hour's tears. Sestoine will not say what took place during that moment of contact, and after a while she seems to forget the episode. Sleel's face is dark. He looks warningly at me as if to say, *Time's running short; the boy must go.*

On a day of driving rain I am in my chamber in mid afternoon when Runild unexpectedly enters, soaked, hair plastered to his scalp. Puddles drip from him. He strips and I rub him with my towel and stand him before the fire. He says nothing all this while; he is tense, taut, as if a mighty pressure is building within him and the time has not yet come for its release. Abruptly he turns to me. His eyes are strange: they wander, they quiver, they glow. 'Come close!' he whispers hoarsely, like a man calling a woman to his bed. He grasps my shoulders, he pulls me down to his height, he pushes his blazing forehead roughly against mine. And the world changes. I see tongues of purple flame. I see crevasses opening in the earth. I see the oceans engulfing the shore. I am flooded with contact; I am swept with wild energies.

I know what it is to be an oracle.

My Right and my Left are asunder. It is not like having one brain cleft in two; it is like having two brains, independent, equal. I feel them ticking like two clocks, with separate beats; and the Left goes tick - tock - tick - tock, machine - dreary, while the Right leaps and dances and soars and sings in lunatic rhythms. But they are not lunatic rhythms, for their frantic pulses have a regularity of irregularity, a pattern of patternlessness. I grow used to the strangeness; I become comfortable within both brains, the Left which I think of as 'me,' and the Right which is 'me' too, but an altered and unfamiliar self without a name. My earliest memories lie open to me in my Right. I see into a realm of shadows. I am an infant again; I have access to the first hours of my life, to all my first years, those years in which words meant nothing to me. The pre-verbal data all rest within my Right, shapes and textures and odours and sounds, and I do not need to give names to anything, I do not need to denote or analyse, I need only feel, experience, relive. All that is there is clear and sharp. I see how it has always been with me, how that set of recorded experiences had directed my behaviour even as the experiences of later years have done so. I can reach that hidden realm now, and understand it, and use it.

I feel the flow of data from Right to Left – the wordless responses, the intuitive reactions, the quick spontaneous awareness of structures. The world holds new meanings for me. I think, but not in words, and I tell myself things, but not in words, and my Left, groping and fumbling (for it has not had the disciplines) seeks words, sometimes finding them, to express what I am giving it. So this is what oracles do. This is what they feel. This is the knowledge they have. I am transfigured. It is my fantasy come true: they have snipped that rubbery band of connective tissue; they have set free my Right; they have made me one of them. And I will never again be what once I was. I will think in tones and colours now. I will explore kingdoms unknown to the word-bound ones. I will live in a land of music. I will not merely speak and write; I will feel and know.

Only it is fading now.

The power is leaving me. I had it only a moment; and was it my own power or only a glimpse of Runild's? I cling, I grapple, and yet it goes, it goes, it goes, and I am left with shreds and bits, and then not even those, only an aftertaste, an echo of an echo, a diminishing shaft of feeble light. My eyes open. I am on my knees; sweat covers my body; my heart is pounding. Runild stands above me. 'You see now?' he says. 'You see? This is what it's like for me all the time. I can connect minds. *I can make connections, Mimise.*'

'Do it again,' I beg.

He shakes his head. 'Too much will hurt you,' he says. And goes from me.

I have told Sleel what I have learned. Now they have the boy with them in the inner oracle-house, nine of them, the highest oracles, questioning him, testing him. I do not see how they can fail to welcome his gift, to give him special honour, to help him through his turbulent boyhood so that he can take his place supreme among oracles. But Jen thinks otherwise. She thinks he distresses them by scrabbling at their minds in his still unfocused attempts at making contact, and that they will fear him once they have had an explicit demonstration of what he can do; she thinks, too, that he is a threat to their authority, for his way of joining the perceptions of his Right to the analytic powers of his Left by a direct mental flow is far superior to their own laborious method of symbolic translation. Jen thinks they will surely cull him and may even put him to death. How can I believe such things? She is not yet an oracle herself; she is still a girl; she may be wrong. The conference continues, hour after hour, and no one emerges from the oracle-house.

In the evening they come forth. The rain has stopped. I see the senior oracles march across the courtyard. Runild is among them, very small at Sleel's side. There are no expressions on any faces. Runild's eyes meet mine: his look is blank, unreadable. Have I somehow betrayed him in trying to save him? What will happen to him? The procession reaches the far side of the quadrangle. A car is waiting. Runild and two of the senior oracles get into it.

After dinner Sleel calls me aside, thanks me for my help, tells me that Runild is to undergo study by experts at an institute far away. His power of mind-contact is so remarkable, says Sleel, that it requires prolonged analysis.

Mildly I ask whether it would not have been better to keep him here, among the surroundings that have become home to him, and let the experts come to the House of Double Minds to examine him. Sleel shakes his head. There are many experts, the testing equipment is not portable, the tests will be lengthy.

I wonder if I will ever see Runild again.

In the morning I meet with my group at the usual time. They have lived here several weeks now, and their early fears are gone from them. Already I see the destinies unfolding: Galaine is fast-witted but shallow, Mulliam and Chith are plodders, Fyme and Hirole and Divvan may have the stuff of oracles, the rest are mediocrities. An average group. Hirole, perhaps, is becoming my favourite. There are no Jens among them, no Runilds.

'Today we start to examine the idea of non-verbal words,' I begin. 'For example, if we say, Let this green ball stand for the word "same," and this blue box stand for the word "different," then we can . . .'

My voice drones on. The children listen placidly. So the training proceeds in the House of Double Minds. Beneath the vault of my skull my dreaming Right throbs a bit, as though reliving its moments of freedom. Through the corridors outside the room the oracles move, deep in contemplation, shrouded in impenetrable wisdom, and we who serve them go obediently about our tasks.

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A Consumer Guide to the Science Fiction of ROBERT A HEINLEIN

Compiled by Maxim Jakubowski

Atrocious: •
Bad: ○
Mediocre: *
Average: **
Good: ***
Very Good: ****
Masterpiece: *****

	BRIAN W ALDISS	JOHN CLUTE MAGAZINE OF F & SF NEW WORLDS	ANDY ELLSMORE COMPENDIUM BOOKS OTHER TIMES	M JOHN HARRISON NEW WORLDS	MAXIM JAKUBOWSKI NEW SCIENTIST SF MONTHLY	PETER NICHOLLS FOUNDATION	CHRISTOPHER PRIEST	TOM SHIPPEY ST JOHN'S COLLEGE OXFORD	IAN WATSON OXFORD MAIL	PETER WESTON ANDROMEDA SF MONTHLY
THE DOOR INTO SUMMER	***	***	**		****	****	****	*****		*****
THE PUPPET MASTERS	***	****	***		****	****	***	****		*****
CITIZEN OF THE GALAXY	*	*****	***		***	****	***	*****		*****
DOUBLE STAR	*****	***	**	*	***	*****	****	****	***	*****
THE GREEN HILLS OF EARTH	**	***	***	*****	***	****	***	*****	***	***
THE MAN WHO SOLD THE MOON	****	***	***	***	**	****	***	*****	***	***
THE STAR BEAST		*****	**			***		***		***
HAVE SPACE SUIT, WILL TRAVEL		*****	***	*	**	****		***		****
STARSHIP TROOPERS	*	**	**		•	***	****	****	*****	*****
THE MOON IS A HARSH MISTRESS	*	**	*****	*		**	***	*		*****
REVOLT IN 2100	**	***	***		**	****	*	****	**	**
METHUSELAH'S CHILDREN	*	***	**			****	**	**		**
ROCKET SHIP GALILEO		**	***			**				○
STRANGER IN A STRANGE LAND	***	**	***	○	•	**	•	***	****	**
GLORY ROAD		*	*****	•	○	*	•	**		***
PODKAYNE OF MARS		*	**			•	• *	**		**
FARNHAM'S FREEHOLD	*	*	***			•	○	*		***
TIME ENOUGH FOR LOVE	○	○	•	•	•	*	•	**	○	*
I WILL FEAR NO EVIL	○	*	○	•	•	•	•	•	○	○

THE UNKNOWABLE FUTURE

An Interview with Dr Chris Evans by Peter Linnett

Dr Christopher Evans is a man of many parts, but science fiction readers know him best as an ex-contributor to *New Worlds*, and as the author of a fascinating book, *Cults of Unreason*, which examines movements like Scientology. Add to these his activities as an experimental psychologist, journalist, broadcaster and pilot, and you have a picture of his many-layered life-style.

Evans is the only psychologist working at the National Physical Laboratory at Teddington. His work there involves computer communications and thus he is acutely aware of what he calls 'the apocalyptic possibilities of the computer' which he discusses at length in this interview. As a psychologist he brings a special perspective to sf, and his credentials are impeccable: he was co-originator of a theory of dreaming, now world-famous, which holds that the process is analogous to certain computer activities. His numerous scientific papers have appeared in various learned journals and he's edited a number of scientific books. His knowledge of sf is extensive and he numbers several well-known sf writers amongst his friends. At the time I interviewed him he had just completed a series of taped interviews with sf writers, which will become available as cassettes later this year.

Thus he has a foot in both of C P Snow's 'two cultures', and a superficial observer might conclude that this indicates divided loyalties. Evans insists, however, that he's primarily a psychologist and that the two sides of his life are linked: 'There are natural bridges between what I write and what I create in scientific terms.'

How did your interest in sf develop?

I think that for most people of my age, which I regret to say is now in the forties, interest in sf grew from the great days of *Astounding* way back in the 1940s. I was a schoolboy then, and pulp fiction in this country was confined to detective stories and things of that sort. I remember coming across, quite by chance, the famous *Astounding* in some bookshop. It was then published every other month and edited, of course, by John Campbell. I was riveted by the concepts and by the adult nature of the writing. I would then have been 10 or so, which meant that much of the technology in it was quite beyond me. They'd be talking about hyperdrives and space drives, it didn't mean anything at all to me, but I could see that here was a magazine containing a type of writing I'd never come across anywhere else. As I read it I found that, even though the technology was meaningless to me, I could follow the narrative and see immediately that these were speculative stories about a range of possible futures, some of which, or any of which, I knew could easily come true. I became a passionate sf fan from then on; this was before the end of the war.

Until about 1949, sf was a scarce commodity in this country. There was a magazine called *New Worlds* which you could get hold of once in a while – it came out rather spasmodically. It had moderately interesting British writing, and I could already discriminate between the type of writing coming from the Americans and the second- and third-rate stuff coming from the British. I followed my interest in sf right through into the Fifties and I was passionately interested in it until a date I wouldn't care to define precisely. Intuitively, I'd say that my interest began to wane with the launching of the first Sputnik in 1957. Lots of people have said this, but I do believe that the actuality of space travel took an enormous amount of wind out of the sails of traditional sf.

There's no point in writing about it if it's taking place?

Let me put it this way. I started off as a newspaper reporter before I became a scientist. When I worked on a newspaper in the early Fifties, it was obvious to me that man was going to get to the Moon; I couldn't see how anyone could be so dense as not to realise it. Yet I remember the girlfriend I had at the time thinking I was absolutely crackers. She couldn't see what I was talking about. This gulf between the sf reader and the non-sf person was stupendous.

Do you think part of the appeal was being one of this group of people who thought they knew what the future would be like?

Not much of an appeal for me. I found it aggravating that people were so dense. I dare say there was a coterie of fans who liked the idea of being an in-group, but what I wanted to do, and in fact did, was to proselytise quite considerably. I felt that when it came to something so momentous as space travel, it was mad that people couldn't see that it was about to happen. Incidentally, I remember that even though I was a tremendous optimist – I still am, even in sf terms – when my girlfriend said, 'Let's suppose one does embark on anything as absurd as going to the Moon, when do you think one will be there?' I stared her in the eye and said, 'Definitely, unquestionably, by the year 2000'. That was the sort of thing even the relatively more adventurous fans like myself, and writers too, were feeling in the 1950s. In fact it was barely more than ten years after that. Sputnik went up three years after I had this conversation, and that began to sink into peoples' consciousness. This illustrates a point I'm still tremendously interested in and still fail to get across to people. I find they do not understand it. That is, the exponential nature of growth. I'm not talking about growth in economic terms but in terms of the march of knowledge, the advance of technology.

Can you give some examples and predict some of the things this growth will lead to?

Well, when I came to work at the National Physical Laboratory ten years ago, the first thing I did – I needed to buy some equipment for my tiny research group – was to buy a proper calculator. I bought the best that my budget could afford at the time, a Monroe electrical-mechanical calculator. I thought it was out of this world. It was about the size of a large tape recorder, and weighed a ton. To divide, you had to push five buttons and the thing would chump-chump for ages; I paid £500 for it. Last Christmas I bought, for my wife and several other people, pocket calculators at under £10, which perform the calculations at hundreds of times the speed of that thing I bought ten years ago, and at a hundredth of the cost. They fit in a pocket or a hand. There's an example of growth which has amazed everybody.

Any view of the future, whether one looks at it as a scientist or a technologist, or as an sf writer or reader, must notice the exponential nature of this growth. I'll give an example about computers, which are my enduring main theme of interest. I work in computer communications, in a field which you can call artificial intelligence if you like – I'm simulating personalities in computers. I take the view that the biggest and most rapid growth of all kinds is about to take place in the computer field, and that with this growth is going to come the biggest change in society that man has ever known. Everyone is going to be amazed at what happens in the next decade or so – it is going to be so amazing that it's going to make the sf people look old hat. They're going to look the most pedestrian, old-fashioned bunch that ever walked the face of Earth, in comparison with what is going to take place. I can speculate along those lines if you like and say

what I think might take place, but it may not be particularly important, because I have a feeling that the things that happen will be so surprising that no predictions are likely to have much validity. Even if you sit back and try to think of the most way-out thing possible, fact is going to be far more surprising than that. Sf and everything else will be rolled under. In fact, I don't think we've had a real surprise yet. The Copernican revolution, and maybe Darwin; let's grant those as being major surprises. I think we're in for a much bigger surprise in the not too distant future.

I'll give my own personal hunches and they are hunches which are familiar to readers of sf;

they've been speculated on in sf stories, but they're getting very close to the truth. The really important thing is the growth of computer intellectual power. At the moment we've got a situation where the best type of computer is exceedingly dim in human or animal terms, and for this reason people tend to think that it can't reach anywhere near the level of success or achievement of a human being. We tend to be dismissive of the enormous intellectual power of the brain. All biological systems have colossally powerful computers in them and therefore our baseline is at a rather advanced level in terms of intellectual processing. There are now in existence programmes – which are just one aspect of a computer's brain – with which you can converse in a quite exhaustive way about a small, simple universe. For example, there's a table which is covered with a lot of blocks of various shapes, sizes and colours, and a computer which will control an arm, let's say, and do various things with the blocks. You go to the computer and say, 'Pick up the red block,' and the computer does it. The average person won't think that's very smart. The point is, if there are two red blocks there the computer will say, 'Which red block?' You can then say, 'The one to the right of the green pyramid,' and the computer will do it. If you say, 'Pick up the red block without moving the yellow pyramid or casting a shadow on the white ball,' the computer will say, 'I can't do that, because . . .' It will respond in this way.

The computer programme is in complete command of this minute universe. This is intelligence in the real sense of the word. But, of course, it is intelligence in a very limited universe indeed. You might say that at that rate of development there's nothing to be proud of if this is all we've achieved after so much effort. But if you consider that you're looking at an evolutionary process, and the computer has reached this point, it's quite surprising. The twenty-fifth anniversary of computers has just come up; twenty-five years is not a long period in evolutionary terms. We've reached a great level of sophistication after one hundred or one thousand million years, depending on what you consider to be the starting point of the central nervous system. That's a hell of a time. I don't think computer evolution is going to take anything like that time. I fancy that it's going to take about another twenty-five years; it'll go way beyond us and move on very rapidly into some unimaginable future.

So, to say the least, it will completely transform our lives.

That's an understatement of the first magnitude. A good friend of mine Professor I J Good, like most of the computer pioneers, is aware of the tremendous future of computer intelligence. He has a concept of what he calls the ultra-intelligent machine (UIM), which will perform any intellectual activity as well as any

human being. By intellectual activity I don't just mean playing chess; it can perform any other intellectual activity as well. Jack Good thinks that the arrival of the UIM will probably come around the turn of the century. It could be a lot quicker than that, it might be a bit slower, but it doesn't really matter.

Why doesn't it matter, and why is it so important? Somebody once said that there was no point in developing computers that are as bright as human beings, because we've got enough humans; they're made by the simple biological process of mating. It's pointless to spend millions building a mechanical brain which will do just the same things. This misses the point, because whereas there is a theoretical upper limit to human intelligence in its present form – unless we add on another hundred million years during which we might get very much smarter – there doesn't seem to be a theoretical upper limit to computer intelligence. The point is that when a machine gets to the point of being a UIM, one of the first things you do is to put it to the problem of improving other UIMs. After a while, when it gets to be more intelligent than any human being, it gets progressively better at improving other UIMs, and so the process goes on. Initially, of course, it's a slow growth, but certainly, at some point, when the UIM gets very bright indeed it will continue to improve itself at an ever-increasing rate, because it's able to put all this vastly increased intellectual power to improving others of its kind. That's a point where evolution takes on a new dimension altogether, and I think this is the situation that's likely to prevail.

People go into the question of whether there's life in other parts of the universe. I would say there probably is life, certainly intelligent life. However, whether it's the important feature of life on that planet or solar system is another matter. My hunch would be that all the really intelligent civilisations, if one can use the word, are machines, and that the biological phase of evolution is now far too slow. Once you reach the point of accelerating evolution, unless the system destroys itself by one means or another – let's say fifty per cent of them do destroy themselves, the other half presumably won't and will continue this exponential expansion – it is going to leave any biological phase of evolution far behind. I reckon that if any contact were to come from other beings, they're not going to be biological beings, they're going to be computer beings. It may be that they are perfectly capable of contacting us, but they are aware that there's no point in contacting anything as trivial and insignificant as biological forms of life. The smart thing to do is to wait until the machine phase of evolution gets under way and then introduce contact or destructive processes or whatever is considered to be necessary.

Can you see signs of any of this happening in sf?

To some extent, sf has been aware of the apocalyptic possibilities of the computer. *Answer* by Fredric Brown is a very good story, in which he envisages all the computers on all the planets being linked up, and the end product is God. It's very clever, and in a way I'd go along with that although it's not going to happen in that way. Nor is the being that emerges going to be itself God. But in terms of our own power, it will be so far ahead that it may as well be God. That's a very imaginative, exciting, scaring story. But most computer sf tends to be rather pedestrian. A lot of sf writers were tuned in to technology – they knew about rocket ships and so on. The concepts of rocketry are understandable to almost anybody; with a little research you could get all the background and know what rockets could or couldn't do. It didn't take too much imagination to realise that a rocket would eventually lift off from Earth, that you could make long voyages and so on. These seem to me relatively pedestrian ideas although very dramatic and revolutionary in terms of what most people thought. To understand the enormous future of computers, I think you have to work with them, see what they can do, how they're evolving and what their potential is. The advance of computers will, in passing, roll mankind and all his works in the dust. I think it'll happen very quickly, within our lifetimes.

You were saying that your interest in sf began to wane in the Fifties. When did you start being interested in the type of sf that Ballard and others were producing?

About the time that I began to lose interest in sf, I was going along to the Globe pub in the City for some rather dreary meetings with sf fans. A few writers used to go along; once in a while you'd see someone like Arthur Clarke. A man who did go there regularly was Ted Carnell, who edited *New Worlds*. I remember going there, having just read a story in *New Worlds* which struck me as being totally fresh and moving on to another dimension over and above anything that was being written at the time. It was called *Billenium* by J G Ballard. It was about overpopulation. He'd let his imagination go and envisaged an entire world filled with people. I thought it was a brilliant story. I was horrified to find that no one in the pub liked it; they loathed it, in fact. I said to Ted Carnell, 'This is a fantastic story you've published'.

He said, 'Yes, it's great, isn't it.'

'Nobody here likes it.'

'No, they wouldn't.'

I thought that a cynical view at the time. I was amazed; I couldn't see why it wasn't liked. Attending these Globe meetings, I realised that the sf fan whom I'd thought was very *avant-garde* and tuned in was, in fact, completely left behind by the next generation of sf. That brought me back to an interest in sf. However, there was a long period when there were too few sf stories of that kind. None

of them was carried in *Astounding* which, I think, went into an absolute decline in the late Fifties and Sixties when it became *Analog*. It was awful then. I started to switch off reading sf and hardly read anything again until the revamped issue of *New Worlds*, edited by Michael Moorcock, came out. I think I contributed to the first number.

Perhaps we could set the old kind of sf against the new. What do you see as the major difference between the kind of writer typified by Ballard and the old kind?

I think there's no doubt at all about that: one is technology, the new one is psychology. Absolutely clear. I use 'psychology' and 'technology' in the very broadest sense. This separates the fans who are stuck with the old thing, the frustrated engineers and Meccano-makers. They're wedded to the Victorian view of science, which is that everything is soluble in terms of Meccano sets. The phrase 'inner space', which I believe Ballard coined, beautifully describes the difference between the two types. That doesn't mean to say that there isn't good technological-type writing which could go hand in hand with Ballard's work and that of other adventurous people of his kind. Broadly speaking, the shift that took place in 1957 and which left the whole of sf fandom stranded, was the move from technology to psychology. This is epitomised by Ballard's *The Drowned World*, which came out in the early Sixties and was, I think the first adult sf novel – apart from masterly works like H G Wells' *The Island of Dr Moreau*, for which you have to go back nearly a century.

How do you feel about the use of psychology as such in sf? There can't be many stories which use psychology as other stories use physics.

No. One knows so little about psychology, there isn't much to write about. A psychologist is the first to admit it, or should be. Where psychology comes in is largely when one isn't deliberately playing with psychological ideas in the laboratory sense of the word. You might get the odd story out of, say, a new strain of rats that become very intelligent. Or something about the effects of microsurgery or of sleep deprivation. There are a handful of stories about this kind of thing, stuff which is the subject-matter of modern psychology. It really comes in naturally, as in the case of *Drowned World* where the theme – and I'm sure it wasn't deliberately created by Ballard – is man's rejection of the external world in favour of retreat into his internal world. Such a retreat might take place, for all I know, and may be man's response to the shocks and surprises which are likely to come his way over the course of the next few decades. It's very difficult, for example, to see how man would react – how man *will* react, it's safer to say – to the effect of UIMs. At the moment we have one thing that we prize above all else: that is our intellectual capacity. That is what gives us the right to do so many unpleasant things to animals. Eating them is one of the most simple. We have perpetrated these things because we regard ourselves as essentially a 'superior' species. The general feeling is that we have the right to order the world and run things the way we want to. That includes doing more or less anything we like to creatures which aren't as bright as we are. We justify this on the grounds that our particular degree of intelligence is unique. What will happen to our self-confidence and self-esteem when we find ourselves faced with beings much brighter than ourselves?

Who are your favourite sf writers, and why do you like their work?

Ballard is streets ahead my favourite, mainly because his ideas are so close to my own. He's been a close friend of mine for some time, and we feel very much in tune with each other on that level. I get constant surprises from his writing and see that he's right on the nail, that he's said something which indicates to me a depth of understanding of psychology and sociology which is much more profound than I find in colleagues who are psychologists and sociologists. That's what is so satisfactory. For example, take *High-Rise* which I don't think is his greatest novel by any means. It's nevertheless a major sociological novel, which can be seen on two levels: at macro level where you can equate the high-rise itself with the world, the world of growth if you like; at the micro level it's merely a comment on society, a very ironic comment on the fact that people don't necessarily mix too well, and that giving them lifts and carpets and heated swimming-pools doesn't make them live together any better. I will read anything Ballard writes. He's the only writer of whom I can say that.

I'm a great admirer of Brian Aldiss and I think some of his stuff is super. Like Ballard, I'd have felt he's moving away from sf; much of his more interesting work now has very few anchors in sf. I think he's also an evolving writer, trying to do new things, but I don't feel compelled to read everything he writes in the way I do with Ballard's work.

Then, of course, I've favourite writers who go back years . . . but they're in the past. Van Vogt is marvellous, mainly because he's so rich in ideas. His ideas have no kind of limits or bounds, but he really is a technology character; he's born out of that era. All his stuff consists of extensions of technological development.

For what I'd call trad stuff – and I don't mean this offensively at all – I'd take Asimov without any doubt whatever. Especially his robotic stories, which are full of insight and awfully good prediction, which is what a lot of sf is about.

Which writers do you find most interesting from a purely psychological point of view?

Zelazny, probably. Some of his stuff is very

good, some is very uneven. There's an element of aggression and paranoia in the writing, but I don't like to make comments like this about creative people. Let me talk about Michael Moorcock. His work is very interesting, because it's obsessive and escapist – escapist in a very deep sense of the word. This move back into fantasy worlds – which stems, in the modern sense, from Tolkien – is all based on the fact that the average, intelligent, educated person without a strong focus to his life, without a definite thing that he wants to do, is appalled at the world in its present state and its possible future. He finds that the normal mechanisms for doing something about the world – politics, science, teaching, religion – really aren't satisfactory, or are completely outdated by the march of events. The only thing to do is to create fantasy worlds where there are all kinds of adventure and thrills, in which you can immerse yourself – Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is a classic example. There's no other way of understanding the enormous attractiveness of Tolkien unless you see it in those terms, because, if you analyse it, it's a turgid work, very pedantic, with its awful poetry and whimsy.

Nevertheless, it's an interesting book. The reason I can read it – I'm in the middle of my second reading – is that the inter-relationships are intriguing, and you can see that he's plotted a complete life-space, with people. That works quite well. The people do relate to each other, and their actions are logically consistent, even if they're only one part of the whole. That's intriguing. The successful things, those that appeal to super-escapist minds, are these elements which stick together so well. You get a sense of reality and cohesion. I would go so far as to say that the appeal of this stuff, and Moorcock's, is that in the simplest sense it is schizophrenic. One of the characteristics of particular types of schizophrenia is that the person feels a great sense of uncertainty and unreality about the world, and therefore looks for cohesion and consistency in some part of it. This is generally found by obsessive interests, of which, say, compiling a list of the time-tables of the tramway system in Amsterdam is a good example. You'll find that schizophrenics will look to time-tables and things like that as indications of order in the world. You can see this pattern building up very nicely. Tolkien is very like that and so is Moorcock's work. Moorcock's novels are full of this kind of detail which has links; it gives a constant sense of reassurance.

Can you try to put certain classic sf themes into some kind of perspective, starting with time travel?

Time travel is a particularly interesting example, because I suspect it was the first really mind-jolting concept of a new kind that had come to people. I don't know whether the idea of travelling in time was ever put in fictional terms before Wells. It may have been, but if it was it didn't get any kind of prominence. That was where Wells was so remarkable; he did have such fantastic ideas, and his almost unbelievable predictions must have completely staggered people when they came out. Time travel is a totally revolutionary concept and it's still a revolutionary concept to anyone other than sf fans. The other interesting thing about time travel is that it's limitless; there are possibilities for countless permutations of ideas, over and above a man going back to murder his grandfather. They are all kinds of logical problems about time travel. In any case, the notion of time is most mysterious. The apparent passage of time is a very peculiar thing. When one reads time travel stories one has the feeling that, although it's staggering, there may be some way in which one could actually travel in time. For example, to some degree we already travel in time through our memories. The memory system in the brain is a kind of time machine. It gives you a blurred view of the past, but a trip is made. We accept this. Whether we can move into the future is something else again, and of course that raises all sorts of interesting questions.

Aliens?

As I said, the aliens likely to contact us are going to be machines. Once you've accepted the notion that man is inhabiting a huge and complicated universe, and unless you make the peculiar assumption that we are actually present on the first planet to spawn intelligent life – that just could be, there would have to have been such a planet, on which people like you and me talked and wondered about whether we happened to be the first – then you come to realise there are alien beings and they will be dependent on the planet they live on. Then you have limitless speculation on these beings. The trouble is that you can never be totally shocking or surprising in sf because, if you are, your concept will be so far beyond the grasp of the reader that it makes no sense. There are some things which *are* absolutely beyond our comprehension. There may be no point in the alien machines visiting us, because the things they have to say or do will be totally incomprehensible to us. This idea has only been lightly touched on in sf. Everyone assumes that aliens with a civilisation one million years in advance of ours will merely have bigger spaceships, or be able to handle matter transmission, or have pointed ears – the *Star Trek* view. But you don't have to move very far up the intellectual scale before your motives and activities become incomprehensible to other people.

Let's take the case of my cat, whose behaviour I've been observing with great interest while my kitchen's being rebuilt. To the cat, all this movement around the house must be incomprehensible. We can see that it's a perfectly logical thing to do, but the cat's universe is being turned upside down in the most nonsensical and meaningless way. The difference between cat brain and our brain,

though very considerable, is probably nothing in comparison with the difference that will exist between us and a civilisation a thousand years in advance of ours; or fifty years, if they're moving on at the rate at which machines are evolving.

Robots?

What I've said partly covers this. Asimov saw the problem of the relation between man and the machines he builds – a problem foreshadowed by *Frankenstein* – but even then he only saw the robots as super dish-washing machines, making things easier for us. He saw the upper limit of this as being the point where the robot became indistinguishable from a man. The robot asked itself, 'What am I?' in the same way that Frankenstein's monster did. I think that the machines, which will arrive long before the future Asimov was predicting, will not be the remotest bit unsure; they will know exactly what they are. They'll have no doubt. They may have some doubt about what *we* are and how we stand in relation to them; in fact, exactly the opposite to the traditional view.

ESP and telepathy, which I know you're sceptical about?

I think this is one of the disasters of sf. After Sputnik, Campbell and all the others realised that there was far less mileage to come out of space travel, and that something new and equally adventurous would have to be found. I think they all turned 90°, or 360°, in the wrong direction, and looked at ESP. In the late Fifties and early Sixties there was a spate of ESP-type stories which I think were completely boring. This was one point where they went absolutely wrong. First of all they treated ESP in an exceedingly unimaginative way; that is, they looked upon it as a form of communication. That is to say that one brain was passing information to another. ESP does imply that, of course; but if one replaced ESP with larger, paranormal psychological experiences, I think communication from mind to mind would be the dullest, least interesting and least likely of the lot. The paranormal world is a very much more interesting one. There probably is something in the paranormal, but it's not what we think it is, it's something quite different. When I say that, I'm restating what I said earlier on, that we're due for some surprises. They are not going to be of the kind that suddenly we're going to discover telepathy, or that the Martians are going to land in Trafalgar Square. They'll be something which will, perhaps, allow one to explain or integrate things that we call the paranormal. I think ESP is a dead duck as far as sf's concerned, and symptomatic of its decline.

In your book Cults of Unreason *you discuss modern-day movements like Scientology, which you call 'the science fiction religion'. Can you talk about your interest in the subject?*

I see Scientology as being the most interesting. There are two cults I deal with at length, as you know; one is Scientology and the other is the Aetherius Society. Curiously enough, I have had less flak from the Scientologists than from practically anybody. This is probably because I think I can credit myself with being the first non-Scientologist to catch on to the fact that it actually is a religion. I poked fun at them and said all kinds of things which should have brought their wrath, normally if you don't spell Scientology with a capital S you get a libel suit slapped on you. I told what I believed to be the truth about its origins, and it can't have been palatable to them. Nevertheless, it was obvious to me that it was a religion; there was no doubt about it. I understand they were quite pleased about it. Events have moved on since I wrote the book, and I would say that everything I said is true. It's evolving quite dramatically and becoming an important mini-religion and, I suspect, doing quite a lot of good. What's interesting about it is the way in which it introduces sf concepts. It's fascinating that it was founded by an sf writer – one forgets that now – the only one who's made his fantasies real.

The Aetherius Society are intellectually different. Scientologists are on the whole fairly bright, some of them very bright indeed, but the Aetherius Society are rather dim people, with a very much simpler view. Again, it's significant that the religion incorporates ideas from sf, flying saucers and so on. They really are wedded to the Fifties, and will remain so.

What do you see as the future of sf? Obviously you don't think it has the same role today as it did twenty years ago.

It's got a different role, and very likely a different audience. I would say that sf should now separate itself from escapist sf, which is a completely different field. It so happens that many sf writers have turned their hand to science fantasy, but it is going further and further away. I think that the remnant of sf, apart from that produced by people who want to go on writing endlessly about rockets and so on, is speculative fiction which ought to be the mainstream of modern fiction. Fiction breathed its last with the death of Agatha Christie. The detective novel, the love novel, the recreation of a possible life-style in fantasy form, all these things are now dead. What there's room for is speculative fiction, where one starts to think of possibilities in all kinds of other realms, of which space travel would be one minute fragment.

Let me make a prediction for you. I would say that, unless the UIMs have suddenly arisen, in probably ten years' time the best-selling paperbacks will not be *Hotel, Liner* or *The Guns of Navarone*, but rather traditional sf. They'll be selling millions. It's a huge future for people who can stand to churn out stuff like that, who've got the cast-iron constitution of Hailey and his lot.

What Are They Doing Now?

A quick look into the future at what the science fiction writers of today are working on.
by MAXIM JAKUBOWSKI

BRIAN ALDISS has just delivered to Jonathan Cape, his publishers, a new novel *The Malacia Tapestry* in which he has fabulised a whole ancient Latin city State. He is now about to begin the third volume of his Horatio Stubbs best-selling, mainstream sexual trilogy, *A Rude Awakening* . . . HILARY BAILEY, editor of *New Worlds* (and author of a delightfully affectionate novel *Polly Put The Kettle On* published last year by Constable, and featuring many a recognisable sf character), is philosophically sitting idle, surrounded by her three children, one dog, two cats, one rabbit who chews the telephone wires and two goldfish . . . J G BALLARD has completed a collection of short stories *The Ultimate City*, the title story of which marks a return to more traditional sf after the urban nightmares of *Crash* and *High Rise* . . . MARTIN BAX, editor of *Ambit*, is about to publish *Hospital Ship*, where a large allegorical vessel precariously cruises through a world stricken by a deadly psychic epidemic . . .

JOHN BROSNAN, *Science Fiction Monthly* resident film expert, is working on *The Horror People*, another film book dealing this time with the actors, directors and technicians specialising in the horror film industry. He is also planning, in collaboration with PETER SAUNDERS, *Ready When You Are*, a volume of humorous anecdotes about the film world . . . JOHN BRUNNER is working on a historical novel, involving a lot of research . . . JOHN CLUTE, reviewer for *New Worlds* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, is about to see his first novel *The Disinheriting Party* issued after a long delay by Alison & Busby, and is working on a new novel about Canada . . . D G COMPTON, whose last sf novel *The Continuous Katherine Mortenhoe* might be filmed in France, is considering a major new book with a strong emphasis on love and sex in a science fiction setting. He is hoping to be able to treat the subject in a new way . . .

Prolific MICHAEL CONEY has completed yet another novel *Brontomek* . . . HARLAN ELLISON's gigantic anthology *Last Dangerous Visions* has now been postponed to late spring for American publication . . . GILES GORDON has completed a new book *One Hundred Scenes From Married Life*, which, despite the title, he insists has a speculative content . . . STUART GORDON, having finished his *One-Eye* trilogy, has recently completed a new novel *The Year of the Tyger* . . .

HARRY HARRISON has just delivered to Faber & Faber a new novel *Skyfall*, which it is claimed could prove to be a potential best-seller . . . M JOHN HARRISON, who seems to be writing slower than ever before, is considering a return to traditional narrative, with a novel of strictly gothic fiction, quite unlike his previous *The Centauri Device* . . . ROBERT HOLDSTOCK has just made the transition from short-story writer to novelist with *Eye Among the Blind* and is already working on a second novel . . . Leading French science fiction writer MICHEL JEURY is nearing the end of his third major novel with the intriguing title of *Soleil Chaud Poisson des Profondeurs* (Hot Sun Fish of the Deep) . . . *Science Fiction Monthly* record reviewer MAXIM JAKUBOWSKI has delivered an anthology of French sf to New English Library for autumn publication, and is completing *Eerie Melodies* a large anthology of sf and music. He is also working on a sf novel about the other side of death *Eternity Autumn* . . . LANGDON JONES has begun writing again after a long period of inactivity and has recently completed two long novellas and a short story. Welcome back, Lang, you have been missed . . . MICHAEL KENWARD, technology editor of *New Scientist* and former editor of BSFA journal *Vector*, is publishing *Potential Energy* with Cambridge University Press, an up-to-date assessment of energy sources in the modern world . . . GEORGE MACBETH who is leaving his post as Head of Poetry Programmes at the BBC, is planning to write three novels this year . . .

ANNE McCAFFREY is nearing the end of *White Dragon*, the third and final volume in her Dragon series. She has been commissioned to write a similar fictional trilogy on dinosaurs . . . BARRY MALZBERG's last novel *Guernica Night* is being issued by New English Library in the autumn . . . MICHAEL MOORCOCK is as active as ever! He has almost lost count of the books he has completed over the last six months; they include *The Adventures of Una Persson and Catherine Cornelius in the 20th Century*, a collection of Cornelius stories *The Life and Times of Jerry Cornelius*, the fourth and final Cornelius novel *The Condition of Muzak*, more books in the series of *The Dancers at the End of Time: The End of all Songs*, *Legends from the End of Time* and *The Transformations of Miss Mavis Wing*. He has also completed revising all his Elric books in chronological sequence for a limited illustrated edition to be published by Blue Star Graphics in the USA, later in paperback form by Daw Books. He has also written an original film script, *Stormbringer* for the producers of *The Final Programme*; loosely based on the Elric and Eternal Champion books, it features a hero named Erlik . . .

PETER NICHOLLS of the Science Fiction Foundation is still working on his definitive history of modern sf for Allen Lane/Penguin, *Infinity, Eternity and the Pulp Magazines* . . . LARRY NIVEN and JERRY POURNELLE's successor to *The Mote in God's Eye* is soon appearing in the UK as *Inferno*, and it's all about science fiction writers! . . . FREDERIK POHL'S new novel, ten years in the writing, *Man Plus*, concerns a cyborg and his desperate mission to Mars . . . CHRISTOPHER PRIEST is working hard at a new novel, with the working title of *Wessex Rising*, which, he hopes, might do for time what his *Inverted World* did for space . . .

PETER REDGROVE is another active writer, with *The Glass Ship* completed and several books written in collaboration with PENELOPE SHUTTLE due for publication: *The Glass Cottage* and *Rainsplitter in the Zodiac Garden* . . . Although he is quite secretive about works in progress, we understand that KEITH ROBERTS has recently completed various very long stories of great promise . . . BOB SHAW has completed what is said to be his best novel ever, *A Wreath of Stars*, and is working on a collection of all original short stories . . . MARTIN SHERWOOD'S second novel *Maxwell's Demon* is about to appear from New English Library and he is busy with his third . . . When he was last heard of JOHN SLADEK was working on a humorous sf novel *Roderick, or the Education of a Young Robot* . . . Following the success of the first books in the *Space 1999* series, E C TUBB and JOHN RANKINE have been asked to write two original novels each, not based on the tv scripts . . . BRIAN STABLEFORD is another prolific writer: he has completed the first volume of a projected trilogy *The Face of Heaven* and a novel called *The Mind Riders*. He has also sold two non-fiction books: *Scientific Imagination in Literature*, a history of sf, and *Mysteries of Modern Science* . . .

THE LAST ORDERS

BRIAN ALDISS

The alphameter indicated that two people, perhaps more, were somewhere in the block. The Captain took his ACV slowly down the street. There was a canal to his left; its waters churned as if they were living.

He kept the vehicle's window open. Gusts of rain, by turns icy and hot, beat against the narrow battlements of his face. They helped him stay awake. His was one of the last rescue parties and he had gone without sleep for over three days.

At the end of the foul little street, a light showed. Oil probably: electric power had failed long before the city emptied. He sounded his hooter, peered through the murk, through a bar window. A small figure gesticulated in shadow.

The Captain stopped his engine; the craft sank onto cobbles. He waited. The man inside was still talking, or whatever the thing was he was doing. The Captain felt for a pill in his oilskin jacket and squirted it down his throat with a spray from the drink-tube on his dash. Then he climbed out and made his way to the bar. His movements were stiff with controlled weariness. A slate whirled past his head and dashed itself to bits against a bollard by the canal. He did not blink.

Pushing the bar door open, he went in. A dim light on a counter revealed the outlines of shambles. The last earth tremor had broken most of the furniture and the bottles behind the bar. Mirrors were cracked. He picked his way forward between shattered floorboards.

At the bar stood a stocky man of indeterminate age, dressed with incongruous neatness in an old-fashioned suit. His round head was covered in a fuzz of colourless hair. Oyster eyes sat in his round face. He was talking with jovial animation to a thin old lady dressed in black who perched on a high stool with her hands together on her lap. A beer stood by her elbow, half-finished. The man had a neat little liqueur by him which he had not touched.

Taking all this in at a glance, the Captain said, 'You're supposed to have been out of here hours ago. How come the patrols missed you? In a very few minutes . . . '

'Yes, yes,' said the stocky man, 'we're just drinking up, we're fully aware of the seriousness of the situation. You look a bit tired, have one with us while we're finishing ours. We'll go together.'

'Leave your drinks. We've got to get to Reijkskeller Field. The last ferry is almost due to leave.' The Captain took the stocky man by the elbow.

'Just a moment. Have a beer. This lady here says it's very good. No, no trouble, won't take a minute. We'll all travel better for another drink.'

He ducked behind the bar and came up smiling with a foaming glass.

'I've got to get you out of here, both of you,' the Captain said. 'Our lives are in danger. You don't seem to realise. The Moon, as you must know, is about to . . . '

'My dear man,' said the stocky man, coming back round the bar and striking a positive attitude before his untouched liqueur, 'you need not remind us of the gravity of the situation. I was telling this lady here that I was right there on the Moon, in Armstrong, when the first fissure began. I saw it with my own eyes. It was a funny thing, really, you see, I'm a xenobalneologist, specialising in off-Earth swimming pools with all their attendant problems, and you'd never believe how many! Do you know that there are – or were, I suppose I should say – more swimming pools on Luna than in the USA?

And I'd just been over to see Wally Kingsmill, who owns – well, his family owns – one of the biggest and most splendid pools in Armstrong, and as I was pavrunning down Ordinary, I could hear people shouting and screaming. First thing you think of on Luna is always that the dome might be damaged. As it happened, I had all my breathing equipment by me, I'd used them in Wally Kingsmill's pool you see, and I said to myself, "Right", but it wasn't the dome at all, though that went a couple of hours later and it was curious how that happened, but this time it was the crack, it came snaking along, travelling fast in erratic fashion, and zip, it ran under the pavrunner, which stopped. Just stopped dead, just like that . . . '

'The Moon has been evacuated. Now it's our turn. Now we've got to go. At once,' said the Captain. He felt mist gathering in his brain. 'At once,' he repeated. He took up his beer and sipped it.

'It's a lovely beer,' said the old lady. 'Seems such a shame to waste it.' Her gaze returned to the stocky man on whose every word she fastened avidly.

The stocky man poised himself before his daintily shaped liqueur glass, lifted it, drank it off at a gulp, poured himself another from a green bottle, and resumed his vigil over the glass, all in one movement.

'So of course I climbed off, and it's a curious thing but that crack reminded me of one on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, you know, where Michelangelo painted his . . . of course, it's in Houston now, and I've studied it many times, being interested in art . . . in fact, about five years ago, about the time that the President visited Venusberg, I was commissioned . . . '

'That was seven years ago next month,' said the Captain. 'The President visiting Venusberg. I know because I was on Venus at the time, on a posting to the Space Police. Anyhow, that's immaterial, sir. I must insist you come along now.'

'Immediately.' He trotted behind the counter and poured the old lady another beer. 'You're right, it was seven years ago, because at that time I was under contract to the planetoids. Funnily enough, I was just saying about Michelangelo and, in fact, the grandest pool we put in at the planetoids was finished with a mosaic, consisting of almost a million separate pieces, of Michelangelo's Creation, with God reaching out his finger to Adam, you know, covering the entire bottom of the pool. Beautiful. You should go and see it. At least the planetoids will be unaffected by all the gravitational disturbances, or so one hopes.'

Having finished his beer, the Captain could not tell whether he felt worse or better for it. 'Not only are we all three in grave danger, sir, but you and this lady are contravening martial law established ten days ago. I shall be fully within my rights to shoot you down unless you accompany me to my vehicle immediately.'

The stocky man laughed. 'Don't worry, I'm a strong supporter of martial law in the circumstances. What else can you do? I think it's marvellous, a credit to all concerned, the way the evacuation of Earth has gone so smoothly. I just wish that more attention could have been paid to the art treasures; not that I'm criticising, because I know how little warning we've had, but all the same . . . You can build more swimming pools, but you can't resurrect Michelangelo from the dead to paint his masterpieces again, can you?'

As he spoke, he stared more and more fixedly at his liqueur glass, which gleamed in the yellowy glow of the oil lamp. Suddenly, he pounced on it and drained its contents as swiftly as before, immediately pouring himself another tot. The old lady, meanwhile, climbed down from her stool and was threading her way through debris over to the window.

'Where are you going, ma'am?' the Captain asked, following her. 'I told you to leave.'

'Oh, I won't go away, officer,' she said, laughing at the thought. 'I am as upset about it all as you are. Poor old Earth, after all these millions of years. It's Earth I worry about, not the Moon. The Moon was never much use to us in the first place. I just wanted to see if I could see it out of the window.'

Her words were drowned by a tremendous buffet of wind which shook the whole building and set doors banging and weakened walls collapsing. The window shattered as she reached it, luckily, the shards of glass were swept outwards.

'Oh dear, it's dreadful, what are we coming to? Anyone would think it was the end of the world.'

'It is the fucking end of the world, ma'am,' the Captain said. 'Are you coming, or do I have to carry you?'

'Of course you don't have to carry me. I'm not drunk, if that's what you suspect. You look absolutely worn out. Look, there it is! How I hate it!'

She pointed into the darkness and the Captain stared where she pointed. Furious winds had blown away the cloud. In the night sky, fuming in silver and crimson, was the biggest mountain ever invented, one side of it curved, the other ragged, looming almost to the zenith of the heavens. Gutted lunar cities could clearly be seen across its shattered face. They wondered that it did not fall down upon them as they looked.

Grasping the old lady roughly by the elbow, the Captain said, 'I'm getting you out of here at once. That's an order. Do you know this guy? Is he your husband?'

When she looked up at him, smiling ruefully, he could trace faded youth among the lines and blemishes of her skin.

'My husband? I only met him today – or yesterday, I suppose. What time is it? Though I wouldn't mind a husband like that, old as I am. I mean, he's so fascinating to talk to. We have a lot in common, despite a few years difference in age. A very sympathetic man. Do you know, officer, he was telling me a few hours ago before we came in here . . . '

'Never mind what he was telling you, we've got to get him out of here. This is a rescue operation, understand? It's urgent, understand? Look at the damned thing out there, arriving fast. What's his name?'

She laughed nervously and looked down at her neat little feet. 'You're going to think this is plain crazy after what I said just now, but I've never married. Not legally married, you understand. My life really hasn't been – this may sound as if I'm terribly sorry for myself, still, you have to face facts – but it hasn't been fortunate as far as the other sex is concerned. Goodness knows what his name is. When I was younger, I was often in despair. Very often. After almost every man left – despair again. Yet I wasn't ugly, you know, or possessive . . . I'm sorry, officer, I realise this heart-searching may not interest you, I'm not a particularly introspective person . . . '

'Lady, it's not a question of interest, it's a question of desperation. We're going to get ourselves killed if we aren't away from Earth within the next hour.'

'Oh, I know, officer, but that's exactly what I'm complaining about. Don't think I don't feel as bad as you

do. As I was saying, I never had luck, you know what I mean?, with men. I was telling our friend here, and he was so sympathetic, that my flat was partially destroyed in the first of the earth tremors, when they first told us that Earth might have to be evacuated. And I couldn't bear to think that my little home, and my garden, and the town where I've lived for over forty years, should have to be left behind. I wept, I'm not ashamed to say it, and I wasn't the only one to weep, by any means. . .'

'We've all wept, lady, every one of us. This was the planet we were born on, and this is the planet we are going to die on, unless we move fast. Now, come on, for the last time – out!'

The stocky man had put down another dose of liqueur. He came across the broken floor, carrying two beers, his plain face wrinkled in a smile.

'Have a quick one, both of you, before we go. It'll only be wasted. I shouldn't stand by that broken window, it isn't safe. Come back to the bar.'

'Nowhere's safe. Everywhere's doomed. That's why . . .'

The old lady said, 'I was telling this officer how my flat was partly destroyed and . . .'

'It'll be totally flattened, with every other building on Earth, in a short while. Now, I appeal to you both for the last time – all right, I'll just drink this beer, all right – look, I'm exhausted, and I know your flat was ruined, but I'm appealing to you both . . .'

'You know my flat was ruined!' the old lady exclaimed with anger. 'What do you care about my flat? You just don't listen to what I'm trying to

PAINTING BY CHRISTOS KONDEATIS

say. I told you about this first earth tremor, when my chest-of-drawers fell over, flat on its face. I was in bed at the time . . . '

The Captain, with a certain weary sense of unreality, drew his gun, stepping back a pace to cover them both. He clutched his half-finished beer in his other hand.

'That's enough. Silence, both of you. Vehicle outside. Out of here, move!'

'You've got a funny way of going about things, I must say,' the stocky man said, shaking his head in regret. 'What's the point of violence at a time like this? At any time, really, but particularly at a time like this, when the whole world is about to be crushed out of existence?'

In his stance and gestures, he presented a vitality which the Captain experienced as an assault on his own depleted resources. He found himself saying apologetically. 'I don't want violence, I'm just trying to do my duty and . . . '

'We've heard that one before, haven't we?' said the stocky man to the old lady, but in such a jovial way that even the Captain could not take offence. 'Duty, indeed! You ought to hear this lady's story, it's an extremely nice little anecdote, far more than an anecdote, really, a . . . what's the word?'

'An epic?' the Captain suggested. 'No time left for epics.'

'Not an epic, man – a vignette, that's the word, a vignette of a life. You see, when her chest-of-drawers crashed over, the lady was in bed, as she has related . . . '

'It was two o'clock in the morning, of course I was in bed.' said the old lady, as if something improper had been suggested.

'And this chest-of-drawers had belonged to her mother.' As he talked, the stocky man led the way back to the bar, giving the old lady a chance to say to the Captain, sotto voce, 'In fact, it's been in the family for several generations. It was a very valuable piece, dating from the mid nineteenth century.'

The stocky man lifted a full liqueur glass from the counter, drained it swiftly, refilled it instantly from the bottle, standing with his plump hands palm down on the bar, one on either side of the brimming glass, and managed to complete these manoeuvres almost without a break in his speech.

'So she put on the light – still working fortunately because, if you remember, the first tremor was not severe – in fact a good many people, myself included, I might add, slept right through it. In fact, I'd only just gone to bed, being a bit of a night bird, it was early for me, and she climbed out to see what damage had been done and bless me if the chest hadn't split right down the back, revealing a secret drawer. She had known about the secret drawer but she had forgotten it, the way you do, quite unpredictably, just as you can unpredictably remember something. You see how this ceiling is cracked? We were talking about the cracks in the Sistine Chapel ceiling, but you notice on this ceiling that the cracks mostly run in pretty straight lines. When I was telling you both about the Michelangelo painting, I happened to notice these cracks here, and even as I was speaking I saw that they form a perfect map of a sector of this city which I used to live in when I was an engineering student, and that's going back some thirty years.'

At this point, he made a swoop on his liqueur glass and downed its contents. Seizing her opportunity, the old lady said smoothly, 'And it must have been thirty years since I had used that secret drawer. I put something in that drawer thirty years ago and some trick of the mind – as you say, it's quite unpredictable what you forget and what you remember, particularly when you're getting on in years – some trick of the mind made me forget it entirely until the tremor. And what do you think I'd put in there?'

The Captain went behind the bar and helped himself to another beer.

'I'll put it to you another way,' he said. 'If you aren't out of here by the time I've finished this beer, I'm going to shoot myself.' He set the service revolver down solemnly on the counter and raised the glass to his lips.

'Cheers! I hid a secret diary in that drawer. Mind you, I was no chicken, even then. It dated from my late thirties . . . ' She paused to sob.

'Don't fret,' the stocky man said, passing her another beer. 'I used to keep a diary for years, and much good it did me. One day, I said to my brother, "Look at all these dreary old . . . " Ah, wait, yes, there you are, another instance of how memory is unpredictable! I believe I've got an engagement diary in my pocket which contains a map – yes, here we are!'

He brought a little diary out and began thumbing his way towards the back of it.

'I've nearly finished this beer . . . ' cautioned the Captain.

'Let me get you another,' said the old lady, coming round behind the counter with him, 'because I would like to tell you this rather romantic story before you go.'

'I say, isn't this pleasant?' exclaimed the stocky man, spreading open his diary with a heavy hand and looking up with a smile as he did so. 'You'd never think this was the end of the world, would you? I can't see myself being happy on any other world, not really happy, I mean. Anyhow, here you are, here's the map. I thought I'd find it. Better get my reading spectacles . . . ' He began to search his pockets and then, catching sight of the liqueur glass with a meniscus of drink crowning it, seized that instead, to pause with it half-way to his lips. He pressed his lips with the fingers of his other hand and set the glass down on the counter again. 'You know, I believe I'll join you in a glass of beer,' he said, amazed at his own whim.

'Coming up,' said the old lady. 'You know, I think you're right. It *is* nice here. I haven't been up so late in years – well, not since I was in Norfolk, staying with my cousin Beth last May – and I don't feel a bit tired. You don't happen to have a cigarette, do you?'

'There are some packets on this shelf,' said the Captain, reaching for them. 'I'd just spotted them myself. Let's all light up! I'm not supposed to smoke on duty but, after all, these are rather special circumstances . . . '

They all laughed, suddenly happy, lighting up cigarettes, puffing away, pulling at their beers, instinctively moving closer in the warm light of the oil lamp. Wind whistled outside. Somewhere nearby, there was the crescendo rumble of a building collapsing under the weight in the sky.

'It's moments like this that make life, don't you agree?' said the stocky man. 'Far too few of them, that must be admitted. Poor old Earth. I wonder if it'll miss mankind, just a little bit?'

'Course it won't,' said the Captain, drinking deep. 'Mankind has just been a sort of parasite on the face of the Earth, despoiling it, ravishing its fair face. Those stupid gravity experiments on the Moon, they've brought us to this miserable pass, but we're only leaving a world we've ruined steadily, century by century.'

'Oh, I'm afraid I can't agree with that at all, really I can't,' said the old lady, puffing at her cigarette. 'I have a lovely garden at my flat, I wish you could see it, it'll be spoilt of course, when the Moon crashes, though the

roses are very hardy; I've got a lovely show of Queen Elizabeths. I wonder if perhaps they won't survive? And just opposite, there's the park . . . '

'Quite agree,' said the stocky man. He patted her arm. 'I think we improved the place. It was nothing but jungle till mankind got going. I love cities, theatres, music – swimming pools, naturally, but you'd expect me to say that – and all these snug little bars where you can get together with a few kindred spirits and talk. Take this dear old city, well, here's a map, very small scale, but let me show you where the roads take on the exact configuration of the cracks over our heads . . . It's not a very good diary.'

'I was saying about my old diary,' said the old lady. 'Actually, I didn't find it till the morning after the tremor, and there it was, exactly where I'd left it thirty years earlier. And I opened it, and on the last page, after December 31st – just fancy, no more December 31sts . . . you can hardly imagine it, can you?'

'That's one day I can do without,' said the Captain, and laughed.

'Ah, but it's the day before New Year's Day,' said the stocky man, 'when everyone makes merry! I've seen some New Year's Days, believe me . . . '

'What I'd written where New Year's Day should have been was rather a desolate little sentence. I hope you won't laugh when I tell you, officer.'

'Jim,' said the Captain. 'My friends call me Jim.'

'Jim, then.' She fluttered her eyelids, and lifted her glass to him before drinking. 'Don't laugh, I was 38 when I wrote it, I put "My long quest for love, I realise now that it will never be fulfilled" . . . ' She began to weep.

Both the stocky man and the Captain put their arms around her. 'Don't cry, love,' they said. 'Have another drink.'

'While there's life there's hope,' said the Captain.

'We all have our disappointments,' said the stocky man. 'You have to laugh them off . . . I know when I was 25 I was all ready to throw myself in that canal out there; no, I'm wrong, it wasn't that canal. It was, well, look, it's the spur of the canal that ends at Fisher's Wharf, where Kayle Bridge Street comes in. Let me show you on the map, or you can see it in these cracks on the ceiling. See? There's the end of the canal, at Fisher's Wharf, just by the old chapel, and Kayle Bridge Street comes in here, and on this corner there used to be an old man with a stall selling hot dogs, year in, year out . . . '

'I'm weeping now,' said the old lady, laughing. 'And I wept when I read what I'd written in the diary, and I remember that I wept when I was 38 and wrote the words down, and yet within a week – well, I'd hidden the diary by then – I met a man called, what was his name? I remembered it not a week ago . . . '

'The old man with the hot dogs was at the other end of Kayle Bridge Street, where the railway station used to be,' said the Captain. 'Had a big walrus moustache. On the corner you're speaking of, there was . . . '

A resounding crash made him stop. Part of the ceiling, including the interesting cracks, collapsed, showering them with flakes which fell in their beers. The building next door collapsed. Dust and grit billowed in through the open window.

'The vehicle!' exclaimed the Captain in horror. He set his glass down, removed his other hand from the old lady's clutches and staggered across to the door. Outside, the ACV had half-disappeared under rubble which still slid and bounced across the road into the boiling canal.

'Come and look at this!' he called. They joined him at the door.

'We'll have to walk to Reijkskeller Field,' he said. He looked at his watch. 'We'd better get going.'

'It's raining. I'm not going out in that,' said the old lady. 'What time is it?'

'Look at that horrible thing in the sky. Makes you shudder,' said the stocky man. 'What are the chances that it will miss Earth and just swan off into space?'

'Nil, absolutely nil,' said the Captain. 'Let me just fetch my gun and we'd better get going, rain or no rain. The last ferry's waiting for us. Once we hear the siren, we've got five minutes and then they blast off, and we'll be stuck here, alone on Earth. Better hurry.'

He turned back, muttering, into the bar. The stocky man went with him, brushing white dust from his suit. 'I suppose you're right. Let's just have a last drink. One for the road. But you know you're wrong about that hot dog stall. I was so poor when I was a student that I used to live off hot dogs, so I went to that stall just about every evening for two or more years, so I ought to know, and I remember . . . '

'All round the wharf was part of my patrol area when I first joined the force, so I ought to remember. The canal finished – hey, where's my gun? I left it on the bar.'

'Perhaps it fell down behind. Look behind.'

'You haven't got it, have you?'

'I loathe guns. Fist fights, no guns. You wouldn't really have shot yourself, would you?'

'Look it's not here. Are you sure you didn't take it? You could be jailed for that, I'm warning you. God, I feel so exhausted.'

'I told you, I have not touched your gun. The last people left on Earth and you think I'd steal your gun!'

'Don't you two quarrel, just when we're having a nice time,' said the old lady brightly, bustling behind the bar and bringing out three new glasses. 'I always fancied myself as a barmaid. What'll it be, gentlemen?'

'That's the stuff, love,' said the stocky man, rubbing his hands in delight. 'You're a woman after my own heart. I wish I'd bumped into you thirty years ago, that's all I can say. I'll have another beer and perhaps I'll just have a quick liqueur too while you're pouring it. Keeps the cold out.'

'Mind if I try that stuff?' asked the Captain.

'Help yourself.' He pushed the liqueur bottle over. 'On the house.'

'Your bonny blue eyes, lady!' said the Captain, lifting his drink with trembling hands.

'You're darlings, both of you,' she said, adding, as she lifted her own glass, 'and here's to Earth, the best planet in the whole universe!'

They all three drank. Distantly, a siren wailed.

They winked at each other. 'Time for one more,' said the Captain.

'*His* name was Jim, too,' said the old lady, 'and it was really funny how I bumped into him.'

As she lit another cigarette and passed the packet round, the stocky man said, 'We'll go and inspect Fisher's Wharf in the morning and you'll see that I'm right. I can remember exactly the very pattern of the cobbles. Anyhow, as I was saying, Michelangelo . . . '

The siren died away. A new and more insistent wind sprang up outside.

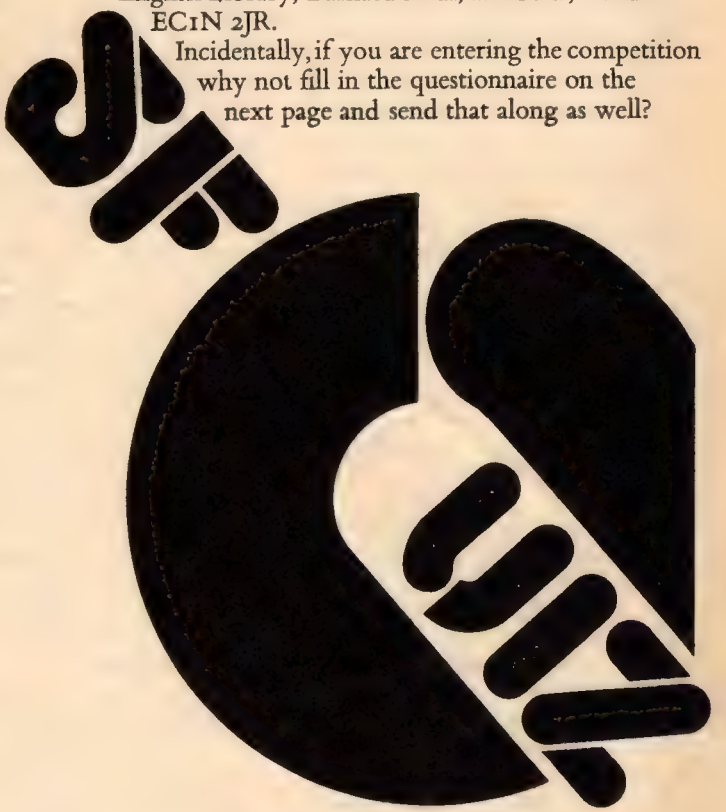
'I know,' said the Captain, 'let's take our drinks and go into the back parlour. There's bound to be a back parlour, and we'll be cosier in there. Bring the lamp.'

'Good idea, Jim,' said the stocky man. 'These little back parlours take some beating. I know once . . . '

1 In which novel does poetess Rydra Wong appear?
2 Who collaborated with Leigh Brackett in writing *Lorelei of the Red Mist*?
3 Who is Edward Hamilton Waldo?
4 Who created a two-dimensional universe in *Flatland*?
5 What was the title of the British edition of Van Vogt's *Siege of the Unseen*?
6 What does Australian sf writer A Bertram Chandler do for a living?
7 He recently published a much-acclaimed gothic novel *Clara Reeve* under the pseudonym of Leonie Hargrave. Who is he?
8 Where would you find Kzinti, Grogs and Phssthpok?
9 Two well-known writers have both used a character called Carmody in their works. Who are they?
10 Who is the author of *The Brightfount Diaries*?
11 Who created Barbarella?
12 Who wrote *The Absolute at Large* and invented robots in a play?
13 What do Sydney Van Scioc, Jacob Transue, Kit Reed, D C Fontana and J Hunter Holly have in common?
14 Which American writer is obsessed by psychotic astronauts, sex, chess and race-tracks?
15 Who created the following characters:
a) Ensign Flandry;
b) Northwest Smith;
c) Nicholas Van Rijn;
d) Hari Seldon.
16 What do A E Van Vogt's initials stand for?
17 What do Mr Takomi, Rick Decard and Joe Chip have in common?
18 Who created a character called Francis Sandow and where?
19 Who wrote a novel called *Rockabilly* (or *Spiderkiss*) about the rise and fall of an Elvis Presley-type rock superstar?
20 What happened to *Flowers for Algernon*, *Who?*, *I Am Legend* and *The Sentinel*?
21 What connection exists between Margaret Saint Clair and Idris Seabright?
22 What is the title of the novel the late James Blish wrote about Thomas More?
23 A well-known sf collector, co-author with C L Moore of *Nymph of Darkness*, also appears as a fictional character in Philip José Farmer's *Image of the Beast* and *Blown*. Who is he?
24 Who was Helen O'Loy?
25 Under what pen name did mathematician Eric Temple Bell write his sf novels?
26 What links Edna Mayne Hull, Kate Wilhelm, C L Moore and Leigh Brackett, apart from the fact they are all women?
27 Which science is often featured in the world of Alan E Nourse and James White?
28 Who wrote *Astronomy Domine*?
29 Which writer has won four Hugo best novel awards and for which books?
30 What is Lester Dent's chief claim to fame?
31 Finn O'Donnevan; Erik Van Lhinn; Lucas Parkes; Anson McDonald; and K M O'Donnell are all pen-names. For whom?
32 Who has written apocryphal Jules Verne, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Kurt Vonnegut and William Burroughs?

SF SUPER QUIZ. How much do you know about science fiction? Now's your chance to test your knowledge and win yourself a copy of *Science Fiction Art*, Brian Aldiss' history of sf illustration. We're offering ten copies of this large-format paperback as prizes to be awarded to the first ten correct entries opened. All you have to do is fill in the answers in the space provided and send the completed quiz to: The Editor, SF Digest, New English Library, Barnard's Inn, Holborn, London EC1N 2JR.

Incidentally, if you are entering the competition why not fill in the questionnaire on the next page and send that along as well?



33 Both Frederik Pohl and Judith Merrill wrote several novels in collaboration with C M Kornbluth. What else did they have in common?
34 Abraham Merritt, C L Moore, H P Lovecraft, Robert Howard and Frank Belknap Long wrote a story called *The Challenge from Beyond* in collaboration. True or false?
35 In which novel do J G Ballard and Elizabeth Taylor appear as characters?
36 Although principally a sf illustrator, he also drew the anatomical sketches of best-seller *The Joy of Sex*. Who is he?
37 Who created the following planets:
a) Mesklin;
b) Anarres;
c) Barsoom;
d) Tschai.
38 What is Venus Equilateral?
39 Commander Suzdal, Rogov, C'Mell and Norstrilia all appear in the work of one writer. Who is the author?
40 What secret were Eli, Ned, Oliver and Timothy searching for in the Arizona desert?
41 *Revolt on Alpha C* was his first book. He went on to better things. Who is he?
42 What happened when Robert Wolff blew the horn?

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QUESTIONNAIRE

From the day when we started work on SF DIGEST our ambition was to create the perfect sf magazine. We were determined to offer a high standard of fiction and more fiction than fact or 'waffle'; there was to be plenty of light relief in the form of consumer guides and quizzes; and an attractive appearance was essential to our plan. In short, we wanted every reader to feel that we had given first-rate value for money.

Now we invite you to tell us what your ideal sf magazine would be like – by putting a cross in the appropriate boxes below and adding your comments if you wish, and sending the form to: The Editor, SF DIGEST, NEW ENGLISH LIBRARY LTD, Barnard's Inn, Holborn, London EC1N 2JR. Then we'll have your help when we set out to produce an even better issue next time.

FICTION
What was your opinion of the following stories?

Trading Post, by Michael G Coney
Good ☐ Bad ☐ Average ☐

Last Orders, by Brian Aldiss
Good ☐ Bad ☐ Average ☐

The Second Generation, by Rachel Pollack
Good ☐ Bad ☐ Average ☐

In the House of Double Minds, by Robert Silverberg
Good ☐ Bad ☐ Average ☐

The Junk Shop, by John Brosnan
Good ☐ Bad ☐ Average ☐

FACT
Did you find this article interesting?

The Unimaginable Future: An Interview with Dr Christopher Evans, by Peter Linnett
Yes ☐ No ☐

Other Comments .....

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MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS
Did you find John Brunner's editorial stimulating
Yes ☐ No ☐

Other Comments .....

.....

Do you like the idea of several small items, such as consumer guides, quizzes, etc., to break up the heavier material
Yes ☐ No ☐

What other items would you like to see?

.....

.....

PERSONAL DETAILS
Age..... Sex..... Profession.....

NEWS

by MAXIM JAKUBOWSKI

PHILIP DICK IN *ROLLING STONE*

Leading American rock and counter-culture magazine *Rolling Stone* featured in issue 199 a long, fascinating article on *The Worlds of Philip K Dick*, by Paul Williams (himself a founder of *Crawdaddy* magazine and author of *Outlaw Blues*, an excellently written book on rock and roll). Illustrated by numerous photographs provided by Dick and his wife, the piece is one of the first major assessments of a prominent sf writer in the columns of the general press. Williams, who is an unashamed fan of Dick, not only offers a valid evaluation of Dick's works but also draws on personal reminiscences and correspondence which shed a highly revealing light on Dick's method of writing, attitude to drugs and general paranoia (somewhat justified by a mysterious break-in at his house). It is interesting to learn of a forthcoming collaboration between Philip K Dick and that other firefly of American sf Roger Zelazny: a novel entitled *Deus Irae . . .* (*Rolling Stone* is available in the UK from Spotlight Publications, 1 Benwell Road, London N7 7AX; 30p plus postage).

JAWS IN OUTERSPACE?

Steven Spielberg, the new, young (27) Hollywood whizkid film director responsible for the phenomenally successful *Jaws*, has started work on his fourth feature film. It is to be a science fiction subject called *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. An intriguing title* although at this stage nothing else is known of the film, which is being produced by Julia Phillips, who was behind *The Sting*. Spielberg's first film *Duel*, about a terrifying battle between a car and a lorry, was written by Richard Matheson, a veteran of the fantasy and sf field. Certainly a sf film to look forward to, unlike the Michael Anderson version of *Logan's Run* soon to open, which writer William Nolan has already disowned.

A SWISS-BRAZILIAN SF EPIC

Patrick Moraz, Swiss keyboard wizard of the highly popular *Yes* rock group is currently working on a solo LP project. The concept is a sf story which takes place in the Brazilian jungle, centred upon a 900-storey pleasure complex, set in the heart of the jungle, upon each floor of which participants have to compete in a series of games, and move up to the next level when they win. When they get to the top, they have to jump off . . .

*The title refers to the official USAF description of UFO sightings.

NEWSWEEK GETS IT ALL WRONG

Sf was the cover subject of the issue dated 22 December of *Newsweek* magazine, which devoted a five-page spread to it, under the title *The Great Escape*. It is unusual enough to see the media examine the sf microcosm but, yet again, the emphasis was all wrong and a major part of the article was devoted to *Star Trek* mania (Robert Silverberg is said to be working on the script of the forthcoming *Star Trek* film) and other more peripheral items of lesser interest. Ursula Le Guin and her ubiquitous pipe, Mister Spock and Isaac Asimov all had their photos featured. A wasted opportunity, with a cover no sf magazine of the Twenties or Thirties would have dared feature, resplendent with multicolour planets, ridiculous caricatural BEMs and the inevitable rings of Saturn . . .

MORE SF PICS

After *Logan's Run*, *Dune*, *The Man who Fell to Earth*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* and *The Ultimate Warrior*, Hollywood and the film industry in general seems to be rediscovering sf in a big way. Robert Altman (of *Nashville* and *MASH* fame) is planning a film version of Kurt Vonnegut's *Breakfast of Champions*, starring Burt Lancaster as the legendary Kilgore Trout and Alice Cooper as Bunny Hooper, a cocktail lounge pianist . . . Paramount is spending $5 million on *Star Trek*, a feature movie based on the durable tv series . . . Warner Bros are budgeting $10 million for *Fade Out* based on the Patrick Tilley novel . . . Universal and Paramount will join wallets for the most spectacular spending spree of all: $20 million for a film tentatively entitled *The End of the World*, to be written by *Clockwork Orange* novelist Anthony Burgess . . . The super-heroes are being dug up from the grave: Philip José Farmer has been asked to script the second *Doc Savage* film and Mario Puzo, creator of *The Godfather* and *Earthquake* is writing a new *Superman* script . . . Roger Corman has completed *Campaign 2020* about a United States where the Presidential succession is determined by programmed assassination . . . Ralph Bakshi, of *Fritz the Cat* fame, is planning a feature-length animation epic *War Wizards* . . . Brian de Palma plans *Carrie* about a telekinetic teenage girl . . . *The Star Wars*, a $9 million movie about a juvenile gang rumble against fascist oppressors of the galaxy is to be directed by George Lucas, author of *THX 1138* and *American Graffiti* . . . Philip K Dick has sold both *Ubik* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* to films, while Philip José Farmer has done likewise with *The Alley Man* and Norman Spinrad with *The Iron Dream* . . .

BEST-SELLING PORNOGRAPHY

France is enjoying a massive sf boom, but the publishers who have achieved the most unusual success in the field are *Le Champ Libre*, with their Chute Libre (Free-fall) imprint edited by Jean-Claude Zylberstein, featuring foremost examples of erotic and marginal sf. All the titles published so far have been translated from English and include the three controversial Farmer 'sf porn' novels *Image of the Beast*, *Blown* and *A Feast Unknown*. Chute Libre have also published Delany's highly controversial *Tides of Lust*, Sturgeon's *Venus Plus X* and marginal novels by Norman Spinrad, Philip Dick, Roger Zelazny and Mike Moorcock. Featured in their '76 list is the first world publication of *The Woman Factory*, Ian Watson's third novel still without a publisher in its own language due to its contents of heavy sex and violence. Future authors include Barry Malzberg, Richard Geis, and J G Ballard. Zylberstein (14bis rue Pierre Nicole, Paris 5) will publish any good books with strong sex or shock value; he is particularly on the look-out for novels which might have been censored by UK publishers much to the author's own displeasure.

A MUSEUM OF SF

Pierre Versins, the indefatigable Swiss-based writer, researcher and collector, has donated his collection (the second largest in the world, after Forrest Ackerman's famed treasure) to the town of Yverdon. From April 1976, as Master of the House, he will greet all visitors to The House of Elsewhere, a museum of Utopias, Extraordinary voyages and SF, 5 rue du Four, 1400-Yverdon, Switzerland. The museum will house over 1,000 reference books, 15,000 books and magazines, scores of records, posters, fanzines, comic strips and toys, all relating to sf, from antiquity to 1976. The House of Elsewhere will also feature regular exhibitions and will be open to all students and researchers, as well as to the general public.

A Consumer Guide to the Science Fiction of ISAAC ASIMOV

Compiled by Maxim Jakubowski

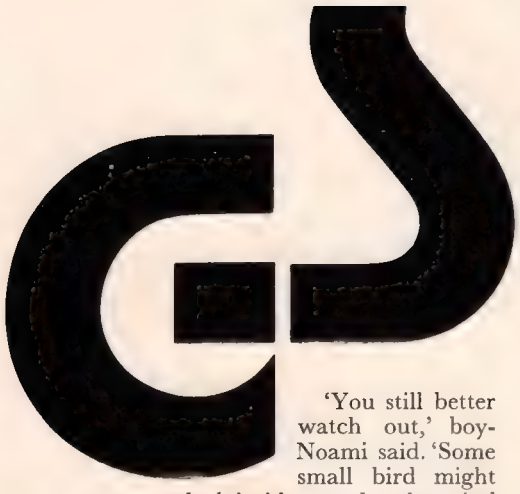
Atrocious: •
Bad: ○
Mediocre: *
Average: ½ **
Good: ¾ ***
Very Good: ****
Masterpiece: *****

	BRIAN W ALDISS	JOHN CLUTE MAGAZINE OF F & SF NEW WORLDS	ANDY ELLSMORE COMPENDIUM BOOKS OTHER TIMES	M JOHN HARRISON NEW WORLDS	MAXIM JAKUBOWSKI NEW SCIENTIST SF MONTHLY	PETER NICHOLLS FOUNDATION	CHRISTOPHER PRIEST	TOM SHIPPEY ST JOHN'S COLLEGE OXFORD	IAN WATSON OXFORD MAIL	PETER WESTON ANDROMEDA SF MONTHLY
FOUNDATION	****	**	****	**	****	****	*****	*****	*****	****
I, ROBOT	***	****	****	*****	***	****		****	***	***
CAVES OF STEEL	***	****	***		***	***	***	*****	**	*****
FOUNDATION AND EMPIRE	**	****	****	**	***	****	*****	***	***	****
THE END OF ETERNITY	*	***	***	***	*****	*****	*****	**		***
THE NAKED SUN	*****	***	***		****	****	**	****	*	****
EARTH IS ROOM ENOUGH	****	***	****			**	****		***	***
SECOND FOUNDATION	*	***	*****	**	****	***	***	***	**	****
THE MARTIAN WAY	***	****	****		*	**				***
PEBBLE IN THE SKY	**	**	***		**	**		****		****
NIGHTFALL	***	***	***	*	**	***	○	***	***	*****
THE STARS LIKE DUST	**	**	****		**	***		**	**	***
THE REST OF THE ROBOTS	*	**	****		**	***		**		***
ASIMOV'S MYSTERIES	○	**	****		**	*	*	**		*****
THE CURRENTS OF SPACE	***	*	**		**	***	**	**	*	***
THE GODS THEMSELVES	○	***	**	•	****	****	•	***	****	*
THE EARLY ASIMOV	*	***	***		**	**	○ •	*		***
FANTASTIC VOYAGE	○	○	*****			*	•	*	***	*

PAINTING BY CHRISTOS KONDEATIS
THE SECOND GENERATION
RACHEL POLLACK

Papu was a girl that day. Slender and quiet (at least, quiet for her), with the small high breasts Naomi joked he could swallow whole.

Naomi was a boy, had been for days, but Papu had only become a girl that morning, in order, she insisted, to run along the beach more freely. 'It's fine for you,' she laughed, fingering Noami's high adolescent scrotum, 'but how could I run with that big stick of mine slapping my belly at every step?'



'You still better watch out,' boy-Noami said. 'Some small bird might get sucked inside you by the wind stream.' He ran off before Papu could grab him.

Though they hadn't hit a boy-girl combination in more than a week they didn't make love that day until the late afternoon. They were lying on the beach, watching the birds rise and dip, feeling the fine white sand stream across them driven by the chill wind. Noami's hand rubbed the gritty layer of sand and salt on Papu's belly. 'You're always so skinny,' he said. 'Someone should invent a pill that changes skinnies into fats. Then you'd really feel a difference.'

'And fats into skinnies?'

'I suppose so,' he conceded.

Papu turned on her side. With one arm across the wide chest she began to lick the salt on her friend's belly. Noami smiled, then he too turned on his side to kiss Papu on the cheeks and lips. Noami was slower than Papu – their sexes made little difference, the rhythms were a personal thing – and the girl took a long time kissing her friend, touching him, sliding up and down his tired body until at last Noami entered her. They rolled in the sand like a single child in a mudpile.

Later, they sat together against the sand dunes, Noami rubbing himself to keep warm, while Papu fingered the small leather bag strung around her waist. 'Is it nice being a boy today?' Papu asked.

Noami made a face. 'Wonderful. Except for this wind.'

Papu laughed, her thin shoulders hunched together as she pressed closer to her friend. Noami said, 'You know when I went to town yesterday? I stopped by that hardware store. With that guy.'

'The one who's always a man?'

'Yeah. He asked me a strange question. He asked what I was originally.'

'Originally?'

'What sex I was at birth.'

Papu grinned. 'What did you tell him?'

'I told him it was fifteen years ago and I couldn't possibly remember back that far.'

The grin widened. 'The whole idea makes no sense. Whatever you start as, it's just an accident of timing, when the sperm hits the egg. Anyway, after twelve months you can take the pill with no side effects, so then you're both.'

'I suppose my mother knew. Do you know he's been a man for a whole month now?'

Papu broke in. 'Actually, they used to write it down. Your sex, I mean. When they recorded your birth.'

'Why?' Papu shrugged. Noami went on, 'Jonan told me once about the world before they invented the pill. Do you realise everyone stayed in one sex their whole life?'

Papu laughed. 'It sounds like a prison sentence.' She stood up to stretch her arm towards the sea. 'I sentence you to womanhood. For life.' She laughed again.

Noami stood, still hugging his arms. He stamped his feet. 'Let's go back to the tent. I'm too cold to wait for sunset.'

'You're always cold as a boy,' Papu said. She pressed her soft arms against her breasts. 'I'm going to stay a girl for ever,' she pronounced. 'Then I'll never get cold.'

Noami watched the gentle curve of Papu's hips as Papu darted past him up the sand dunes.

Alone, their tent sat on the edge of the dunes overlooking the beach. No one came so far from the central beach so late in the fall; the residents of Zandvoort stayed in town or on the boardwalk, while the crowds had all returned, to Amsterdam, to Frankfurt, to New York. When they first came they used to see bicycles riding up and down the hilly path that ran along the dunes. No more. Soon Papu and Noami would leave, then only the gulls would stay to search for food through the dark winter.

While Papu started dinner on the camp-stove Noami threw on a loose jumpsuit and belted it with the leather strap that held his pill sacks. A moment later Papu crawled inside her black and white woollen djellaba. Sitting before the fire, her arms around her knees, her hair all dirty and tangled, she said, 'Before the pill, when everyone stayed the same, they still had a whole range of sexes, didn't they? Like hermaphrodites. Remember that time you and I took both pills at the same time and our tops and bottoms kept going in and out all day until we both settled somewhere in the middle?'

'Jonan said that no matter how different their sexes, everyone tried to think of themselves as either a man or a woman.'

'And nobody changed.'

'Some people did. But it took a long time, years, with pills and even operations.'

Papu shivered. 'They must have all hated themselves. Or each other.'

'Apparently they all convinced themselves they liked it that way. They used to argue about which sex was better.'

Papu watched a gull slide past. 'Sometimes I wonder what it felt like when they announced the pill. I think I would have cried.'

Noami shook his head. 'People hated it. It terrified them. Do you know they tried to put Riister in jail? They used to stone his house.'

Papu laughed.

While he half-absently stirred the rice Noami said, 'Do you remember that day, in physics, when a couple of kids switched while they waited for the experiment to finish?'

'Uh huh. And Josje got all churned so we spent the rest of the afternoon loosing him.' She grinned. 'He called us "smug wonderkids".'

'Yeah. He also called us "the second generation".'

'That's right. Actually, he really meant the third.' Papu held up three skinny fingers. Pointing to each one she said, 'The pill came out when our grandparents were kids. So our parents were the first generation to grow up entirely with the pill and we're the second. But we're really the third. One, two, three.'

'Except we're also the first. Look, our grandparents were raised by people who'd grown up without the pill. So our grandparents must've looked at things the old way. Remember, Josje said that his parents have never really accepted the pill, they've always seen it as something great but also very scary. And those people raised our folks. So our folks must still think a little the same way. That's why Josje got upset, because he couldn't accept the pill as something you do just to pass the time. It's still very serious to him. So we're really the first generation, the first ones who have known and accepted the pill all their lives.'

Papu pretended to nod sombrely. 'I understand. We're the second, but we're really the third. Except we're also the first. And, since no one took the pill for years after Riister invented it, we're secretly the fourth. Actually, we're everybody churned into one.' She stood up and spun away. The djellaba's skirt swirled heavily in the damp twilight, then settled against Papu's legs as she stood watching the dunes.

Noami looked at his friend's hair lifted by the wind, at the lank beauty in the skinny body. 'Papu,' he called softly, 'come here and kiss me.' Two steps and Papu kneeled before him. Gently she lifted Noami's face then placed her lips against his mouth.

Her wild eyes stayed open through the long kiss.

They cooked and ate their dinner quietly. Afterwards, they sat by the stove, Noami's arm around Papu's curled-up body. 'Change with me?' Noami asked. Papu rose in one motion. Taking Noami's hand she led him into the tent.

Naked they lay loosely in each other's arms. Papu placed the boy pill on his tongue just as Noami swallowed the Riister gyno print. While the pill dissolved and moved through the blood something like awe chilled Noami and he wondered if everyone felt this way, if his children and their children would tense before the change. Only the second generation . . .

Papu moaned as the change started and then Noami felt it, the hormones shifting, and both of them rocked softly back and forth. Noami's breasts swelled, with a twinge of pain; the layers of fat underneath the skin seemed to run like water, from the shoulders to the chest and arms, from the waist to the hips and thighs. His skin softened, his throat smoothed as if gentle fingers pressed the bunched larynx. The testicles shrivelled, the penis pulled in. He felt Papu's hand touching him.

And inside the fence of Noami's arms, Papu changed. The legs and arms hardened, the face became sharper, angular, the breasts shrank as if the pressure of Noami's breasts had flattened them. When she touched herself the clitoris had already swollen, nearly two inches, to lie like a tentacle against her fingers.

A calm settled on them and they wound their arms and legs together. The superficial changes had ended, the hormonal shift had primed the body for the Riister print. Noami's balance jerked; it felt like someone had kicked him – like someone had kicked a switch inside him. An inner explosion, like yet totally unlike an orgasm, spread through his blood to his skin, down to the toes, filling his face. His insides collapsed and he gripped Papu tighter, even as Papu dug her fingers into his back.

Then he couldn't feel Papu at all; he could see her, though the image wavered, insubstantial, and his arms stayed around her back, yet he couldn't feel anything at all. Lying still, his own body wavered, flickered, like a ghost uncertain whether to leave the world or enter it.

Max Riister speculated, and later tests bore him out, that during the precise moment of change (subjectively experienced as several seconds) the human body doesn't 'exist' as a physical object, but rather as a field; an unstable field. Under pressure of the hormones, Riister wrote, the human form relinquishes its body print, and then, perhaps further triggered by the massive hormones, the field somehow takes on the new print. How else could he explain the fact that when he gave his female test-subject what he thought was simply a concentrated hormone the drug not only changed her secondary characteristics but also her genitals, her internal organs, even her chromosomes?

The vast research that had gone on since Riister's death had really yielded little result beyond his initial speculations. Biologists, physicists, chemists – not to mention philosophers and even theologians – were still trying to cope with the massive break in assumed knowledge. It was known that the pill worked, that it was harmless no matter how often taken, that both male and female forms functioned reproductively, and that the two forms were distinct bodies (you could escape a cold by changing sex), even though memory and personality were continuous between the two bodies. But how the pill actually worked – no one could say.

The last of the known facts, the single personality, was certainly the most important piece of knowledge, and therefore the most disputed. Behaviourists and materialists constantly tried to puncture the thousands of experiments performed on literally hundreds of thousands of subjects. The findings held. By every possible indication, from Rorschach to occupational aptitude, the two bodies, male and female, were one person.

Acceptance of this fact indicated a possible answer to the central question of how the pill worked. Suppose, at conception, that each individual can potentially become either male or female. As the foetus grows it necessarily chooses one of the two, but the other potentiality is never lost. Somehow, it grows along with the real body. Before the pill, there was nothing to bring this potential body into being.

The pill jolts the normal body out of its firm reality. As suggested by Riister, the pill doesn't really change male to female or vice versa. Rather, its massive hormonal attack makes the original body so unstable that the other, the potential body, becomes the more stable of the two, and emerges to banish the other body into the realm of potentiality.

Detractors of the 'potential body theory' insisted it created more problems than it solved. What was the nature of potential existence? How could a non-existent body grow? To non-scientists, to Papu and Noami, the questions hardly mattered. Only one thing really counted: the pill worked.

The flesh settled on Noami's body like a slap from a sudden gust of wind. Noami stiffened, then relaxed as the warm joy of newness washed over the tired body. His eyes closed and he tossed his head . . .

Her eyes closed and she tossed her head.

Now she felt Papu's arms pull her closer and she opened her eyes to see his face warm and calm as if he lay in the sun. When she kissed him she could still taste the salt that had coated the girl Papu's lips. She reached down and held the erect penis while Papu kissed her nipples. But they were both tired and a moment later Papu yanked an open sleeping bag over them. They fell asleep, Papu's head on Noami's breast.

Four days later, when they packed their equipment on the back of their bicycles and returned to Amsterdam, Noami was still a girl and Papu still a boy. They rode slowly and arrived in the Jordaan in late afternoon. The oldest part of the city, the Jordaan, or 'garden', was a maze of narrow twisting streets, with bent houses propped up by huge beams of wood. Papu and Noami lived in a brick house hardly wider than a doorway, with a stairway so steep the bannister ran almost vertically. After they'd dropped their packs Noami announced that she wanted to call her parents. Papu nodded. He leaned on the window-sill, looking at the trees planted in the street by the people of the neighbourhood to keep out the cars.

Noami's bedroom was a low room of orange walls and soft blue cushions strewn about the wooden floor. A blue trim window showed the garden at the back of the house. In one corner of the room crouched a stuffed unicorn, a present from Papu. Schoolbooks cluttered the low desk. It was a pleasant room; very different from Papu's stark bedroom, with its white walls and black floor, empty save for the mattress, the desk, and the neat piles of books. Papu's room suited him, like his black and white clothes, like his theatrical make-up that raised the cheekbones and narrowed the nose while it lengthened the mouth and eyes.

Noami's parents didn't answer. She put down the phone and lay back on the bed. Should she go downstairs to Jonan's house and take a shower? Soon. Impulsively she pulled off her jumpsuit, then lay back again, sliding her hands in long strokes from her shoulders down her breasts and belly to her thighs. She scratched her pubic hair. Should she grow a beard? You could grow whiskers as a boy, then switch to a girl, and though the roots died and the hair didn't grow any more, it didn't fall out either.

Not this week, she decided.

Her hand fell on the twin sacks beside her. She could take an androprint. Because of the trip she hadn't taken a pill completely alone in weeks. It might do her good; lately she'd felt nervous, cut off from herself. Papu sometimes overwhelmed her. She glanced behind her to make sure she'd closed the door; Papu wouldn't come in unless she called him.

Sitting up straight she crossed her legs in a half lotus. The pill tasted slightly bitter on her tongue, and she could feel it stuck in her throat though she knew she'd swallowed it. She pressed her breasts. Her groins throbbed, her womb seemed to clutch itself. Pain – she sucked in air as convulsions threatened her. Had she taken the wrong pill? No, she could feel her breasts flatten, her throat thicken . . .

At last came the moment of calm. Noami closed her eyes: calm, weightless, a phantom in space. Then the jolt as the flesh returned, the warm bright light deep inside the groins.

He rolled his head back as just his fingernails crawled slowly down his body. He laughed. The new skin on his flat chest felt almost fuzzy. He squeezed his waist, scratched his pubic hair, reached down to stroke the penis . . . He frowned, shook his head, then his whole body started to tremble as his eyes jerked open and he stared down at the place above his thighs.

'Papu!'

Papu lay on his bed, fingering a wooden flute. A long Indian skirt covered the bottom half of his skinny body. He had tossed aside the flute and closed his eyes when the scream came. He leaped to his doorway, spun around, flung himself at Noami's bedroom, where he kicked open the door – then stopped.

Before Papu actually realised what he was seeing an unconscious smile flickered across his face. A smirk of terror followed it. 'I . . . I took a boy pill,' Noami whispered. The shoulders and chest followed Noami's male print, but a soft green down covered the area around the nipples and the navel. The pubic hair also shone green. And below the hair, slightly above where the penis should be – Papu saw a dark round hole, about four inches across, rimmed with thick soft flesh. From the centre protruded a thin wavy tentacle, about four inches of it showing outside the hole. Papu couldn't see how far inside the tentacle started. 'I took a boy pill,' Noami repeated.

Unconsciously Papu moved his hand to touch the strange shape. 'Get away!' Noami screamed.

'All right. OK. Try to loose yourself.'

'How can I loose myself? Look at me.'

'I know, I know, but you've got to. Look, I'll call for help.' He grabbed the vid phone. 'I'll call Josje.'

'Blank out the video,' Noami cried.

Papu jerked his head up and down as he dialled. *Be home*, he thought. *Please be home.* But even as he half prayed, an hysterical desire urged him to kiss and hug Noami. The screen lit up but to a blank whiteness which meant Josje had also cut the video. 'Who is it?' came a tight voice.

'Papu, Josje, we need help. Noami . . .'

'I can't help you. Leave me alone.'

'Josje, don't hang up. Please don't hang up.' Behind him he heard Noami crying in short ragged gulps. 'Something terrible has happened to Noami.' He stopped suddenly, absurdly aware that he couldn't think of what pronoun to use. 'Noami took a pill . . .'

'I told you I can't talk to you. Don't bother me.' The screen went dead.

Noami gasped, 'Aren't you going to do something?'

'Let me think,' he shouted. He glanced at Noami then looked away, jarred by the look of pleading terror that had collapsed the features of Noami's face. He forced himself to turn around. 'Shall I call a doctor?'

'No. What can a doctor do?'

'Maybe I should call the Riister Institute.'

'So they can make me a lab animal?'

'Don't scream. Please. It's not going to help. Maybe if you just took a girl pill you'd get back to before this happened.'

'No, I'm scared.'

'But you've got to try something.' He got to his knees to take Noami's hands but he pulled them away. 'Please. You can't just sit there.'

'You act like I did something wrong.'

Papu found Noami's girl sack and took out a gyno-print. 'Here. You've got to try it.' Noami stared at the pill, then seized it and gulped it down. Papu watched the change. As far as he could tell the hormones were working properly. Then she's still human, he thought, a genuinely new sex, but as human as men and women. 'Try to stay calm,' he urged. Suddenly Noami's body convulsed; for an instant Papu couldn't see it. Then . . .

The woman looked down at herself, her eyes and fingers hungry to devour every normal human inch of her. When she finally looked up at Papu she started to cry, then grabbed him.

'Papu,' she said, 'you have to promise me something. Don't tell anyone.'

'But shouldn't we have you checked?'

'No. No one.'

'Maybe something's gone wrong. Inside you.'

'I don't care. I just won't take the pill anymore. I don't mind staying a girl. Really.'

'But the Institute should know.'

'The Institute should not know. Promise me.'

He stroked her head. 'I promise.'

For two weeks neither of them mentioned the mutation that had seized Noami's body. Once they saw Josje, sitting by himself in a café. After a minute of strained conversation he asked, dutifully, why they had called him. Before Papu could answer, Noami said, 'Nothing really'. She managed a short laugh. 'I got churned up about some trouble with my parents. Getting back to town did it, I guess. Everything's fine now, though.' Papu stared at his coffee.

A tension left Josje's shoulders. 'You shouldn't let parents bother you,' he said. 'They can't harm you.'

Noami smiled. 'I realised that and I felt fine.' When Josje left shortly after, Papu noticed that the teacher no longer wore his sack of pills.

For two weeks neither of them changed sex. Now and then Noami told Papu that he shouldn't restrict himself just to support her. Usually, Papu didn't answer.

One afternoon, they sat by the bank of a canal, watching the ripples from a pair of ducks paddling up and down in the water. Noami said, 'Do you suppose I was a girl originally? I feel so natural staying a girl.'

Papu said nothing for nearly a minute. When he spoke he didn't look at her. 'I'd like to talk about what happened. With the pill, I mean.'

'No.'

'I just want to talk about it. Not tell anyone. We should try to understand it.'

'There's nothing to understand. I

just can't take the pill anymore.'

'I can't stand just staying in one sex. I feel like I'm only half alive.'

'I never told you to stay a boy. I never asked you to.'

'Do you think I can merrily change back and forth while you stay miserable and scared?'

'I'm not scared.'

'If you're not scared, why won't you talk to me?'

For a moment Noami just sat holding her arms. Finally she said, 'What did you want to say?'

Papu crouched forward. 'I've been thinking a lot about what happened. The way I see it, when you take a Riister print, the boy or the girl, the main thing it does is break down the old print. It doesn't really change you into anything, it changes you out of something. For a split second you become nothing. Then, because the old body's unstable, a new body print enters the vacuum and a boy becomes a girl. The thing is, we've always assumed there're only two basic prints, male and female, but suppose there's really a whole range of prints, maybe an infinite number, each one with its own potential body growing alongside the original.'

'Like monsters in a giant zoo?'

'No. Like people. Like men and women. Just because we've only seen two sexes so far, that doesn't mean the others aren't human.'

'So, in other words, I made a great breakthrough. No thank you.'

Papu tossed his head. 'Maybe it all depends on what you expect. Maybe, if you take the pill and think "boy" then you become a boy. But if you don't expect something definite, if you just relax and let it happen to you, then when the pill breaks down the old print, anything at all can take its place. You can become anything.'

'So you're saying it's my fault.'

'I'm not talking about fault. It could have happened to anyone. Look, when the pill first came out everyone believed absolutely that only two sexes existed. And maybe, since that's what people expected, that's what happened. But people don't think so rigidly anymore. You said yourself we're a new generation.'

'You sound like you want me to celebrate that I became a monster.'

'Come on, you know I don't mean that. Please.'

'Well, that's what it sounded like.'

'Maybe we're the first generation to grow up without the old expectations.'

'We still expect that you can only change between a man and a woman.'

'But at least we know we can change. We know that one body can't confine you, that you can lose and gain body prints. Maybe we're the first generation to really accept that.'

'Did you ever think that the old ideas might have protected us? At least they kept us locked up in a nice safe place where we couldn't harm or scare ourselves. Perhaps when Riister invented the pill he opened a door. So far we've only stepped outside, very carefully, but soon we'll take one step too many, and suddenly we'll find we can't get back.'

Papu waved a hand. 'The point is, what happened to you could have happened to anyone. It happened to you by accident.'

'Do you think . . .?' She paused. 'Do you think the same thing has happened to other people? Or will happen soon?' Papu said nothing, and Noami went on, 'I can't decide if that comforts or frightens me.'

'Do you see, though, that if it could happen to anyone there's no reason why it should happen to you twice? In fact, it shouldn't.' He added compulsively, 'Not unless you wanted it.'

'It all sounds so plausible. But you don't change like that. You don't know.' She raised her head, slowly. 'What do you want me to do?'

'Take an andro-print and at the moment when everything suspends itself calmly think about your male print. Picture it in your mind.'

'What if I can't picture my male print? What if all I can picture is that thing? How can you tell me to do anything "calmly"? Don't you understand, Papu? I'm scared.'

'But you can't just cripple yourself. Suppose you saw something really frightening one day, an hallucination. Would you cover your face for the rest of your life?'

'It's hardly the same thing.'

'No? Changing sex is a natural human function.'

Her large hands slapped the grass. 'It's all words. You're just throwing words at me. This grand theory – you haven't tested it, you haven't found any proof. Yet you tell me to take a chance on it.'

'But it does explain what happened, and it matches what we know about Riister prints, as well as the latest theories. I called Dimitri at the Institute . . .'

'You didn't tell her?'

'Of course not. I just said I wanted to research an idea.'

'It still scares me. Even if your theory works . . . I don't know, I think about it so much, that thing, maybe I'll take the pill and get the wrong picture in my mind.'

'You can always get back. You got back before.'

'You sound so positive, but what if I don't get back? What will you do with your positiveness then?' She stood up, hugging her arms, staring at the water; to Papu's surprise she said, 'I left my pills at home.'

With a grin Papu reached in his bag and took out a small metal box. The cover showed a gold picture of a panther. Inside, reflected against polished copper, lay four pills.

'You come prepared, don't you?' After her fingers had plucked the yellow andro-print she took off her trousers to sit crosslegged in her loose T-shirt. With a shrug she swallowed the pill.

Will-power kept Papu's muscles loose. He watched the shoulders fill out, the T-shirt flatten against the chest. The vaginal lips swelled under the lengthening clitoris.

Noami shivered, blurred, and Papu leaned forward like a dog. Then the body jolted into focus. For a second both of them sat motionless, unsure what had happened, until Noami reached down to hold the small timid penis in his hand, as if to offer Papu a gift. With a shout Papu flung his arms around his friend. Laughing, they fell down on the grass. And yet . . . a strange look touched Noami's face, then vanished, like a sudden wind. A sad, almost a disappointed look.

Later, when they made love on Papu's white sheets, their hands against his black pillow, Noami, who at first roamed Papu's body with a recklessness Papu had never seen, began more and more to lie listlessly on his side, to stare past Papu's shoulder, to move his hand slower and slower until finally it stopped on Papu's leg. When Papu pleaded, 'Tell me what's wrong,' Noami only answered, 'Nothing. Just the strain, I guess.' Again the strangest look tried to claim Noami's face; again he banished it.

Papu sat alone, her legs curled beneath her, in the grass-covered mound before the Vondelpark Rose Garden. She'd become a girl twice that day, staying a boy for only five minutes when she realised that maleness wouldn't evaporate the depression from her chest. She'd changed quite often the past week; Noami also. Sometimes one of them would change in the morning, then suddenly in the afternoon throw down a book to swallow a pill.

All day, all week really, Papu had wondered what difference it made, boy, girl. The very strangeness of the question disturbed her. Papu, her whole generation, they never divided themselves. You were Papu or you were Noami. One person. Still, she could pick out some differences. Just that act of changing unbalanced her; the body seemed maladjusted, the shoulders too heavy as a man, the thighs too thick as a woman. Normally you soon adapted, yet for the last week Papu had found looking at

a mirror strangely upsetting. Boy or girl looked *wrong*, like a drawing by an artist who hadn't learned proportion.

Papu squirmed. Why couldn't she sit properly? She shifted her white cotton cloak over her black body stocking. The cloak pressed her shoulders.

What other differences could she discern? His male body moved more forcefully, more loudly, though it seemed unsure of itself. Her female body moved more agilely, softer yet less vulnerable. She tossed her head. Nonsense – the whole idea. Boy or girl, Papu moved the same, long loose steps, shoulders slightly curved, head tilted to the right.

How could you categorise yourself? Sex, for instance. Though the boy Papu tended to play more than the girl, sometimes jabbing with his groin at Noami's body, he could also lie back, quiet and peaceful, while the semen gently oozed into his lover. And the girl – though sometimes the skin and bones floated away leaving only the white-hot core, at other times she attacked Noami like a starved insect.

Yet, despite complexities, the gender did make a difference. She knew it did. Those two weeks when they hadn't changed she'd felt locked in a cage, a mask covering her eyes. Something was excised during those two weeks. You didn't change just for fun; you changed to complete yourself. Papu couldn't define the differences, certainly couldn't list any broad categories or even specific characteristics, but girl Papu and boy Papu thought differently. They confronted the world and other people differently. Or rather, they confronted it together, they complemented rather than contradicted each other. Separate, they were each half a person; together, they were whole.

Now she and Noami had discovered that the totality contained more than just two perspectives, perhaps an infinity. Boy, girl, both seemed incomplete now, dishonest. Or maybe they'd discovered an entirely new perspective. Explorers. Explorers of sex, of bodies, of identity. Maybe the time had come, for Papu and Noami, for all of them, simply to step outside, as Noami said, and walk away.

Her mind groped for an image and she pictured a family living in a house with a lawn and a high fence. One day, someone tears down the fence and they discover a jungle of orchids and strange beasts beyond the lawn. Do they continue sitting on the lawn, chatting and dining, or do they walk into the jungle? Papu grinned. She imagined herself stalking through the rose garden like a panther. She stood up.

A queasiness shook her like a sudden flu, and she almost fell. You can't talk away fear. What had happened to Noami – that was real, a physical terror that now filled both minds and bodies every minute of the day. Yet; the fear couldn't obliterate the frustration, or the temptation.

Angry, at the fear that made her skin all cold and prickly, at Noami for thrusting them outside the house, Papu walked away from the garden, stepping through the bodies on the grass like a rat in a maze, until she found a tiny but dense clump of trees before a pond. She crouched down, hopeful that no one would see her.

Which pill? Did it make any difference? She stared at the yellow boy pill, while she clumsily shed her body suit. Wrapped in the cloak, she swallowed the pill.

Should she try to picture something? How had Noami done it? What if Papu couldn't do it? Loose. *No*, she thought. Don't allow it. *Boy*. Think *boy*. But it couldn't happen anyway, could it? From a whole generation of people, why should a mutation pick her? But it might.

The calm. The jolt. Papu sat staring at his body suit. It glittered. The trees behind it shone with a thousand mirrors. Dizzy, Papu gulped air. Even the air sparkled, tiny points of light hitting his face. He touched his shoulders, his chest. Normal. Hairless. Along the upper arm, however, he felt something hard, and when he looked he saw a thin ridge of cartilage running from the shoulder to the elbow. He touched the groin. Smooth. A moment of nauseous terror and then his eyes dragged his head forward to search, to find where two pink boy knobs, one on each side, protruded from the pelvis. He swallowed his panic.

Papu's head wavered back and forth like a snake's. Was it male or female? Vaguely he imagined his grandchildren laughing at the question. The first generation. Flat chest. Call it a boy. The left forefinger touched the left knob. A wave of pleasure convulsed him then another as he touched the second.

The desire to scream, joy, terror, triumph, choked him. Behind him passed an old man and woman. He crouched in a ball, until the sounds ceased, then tugged on his body suit without standing up. The suit covered the arms and legs, though it couldn't conceal the knobs. Papu found he could hold the cloak around them quite naturally. Hoping his face looked normal, he stepped onto the wide lawn.

At first he found it difficult to walk, his weight wouldn't roll right. But he soon learned to balance, though his arches still curved too much. He walked through the dull human beings like an outlaw, tossing his hair, lengthening his stride to the lake where he dared himself to drop the cloak . . .

Then he realised: if the new expectations had infected their whole generation, did that mean that someone else might be glorying in mutation? Could that someone have done it countless times before? Jealousy gave way to fear. Could such a person look at Papu and guess the truth?

Get back, his mind pleaded. Carefully imitating a bored stroller he set out across the several hundred yards back to the woods. Barely twenty yards away a woman – was it a woman? – about 40 years old, sat stiff legged on the grass. Too old, he thought, yet he circled around her, compulsively searching for the body contours against the long dress.

Instead, he saw the face, joy mixed with terror. She looked at him and nausea kicked his stomach. *Get back*. The woman opened her mouth, then shut it. Papu ran. Clutching his cloak he ran for the dark trees. His fingers forced the girl pill between clenched teeth. He waited. The jolt. He looked down to see three vague indentations in his chest. 'O God!' Papu wept. 'Please let me get back.'

The boy pill worked. Like Noami before him, Papu examined every inch of his body before he threw himself back on the ground for a short prayer of thanks. It took several minutes before he could stand, another before he could let go of the tree and head home.

He wanted only to see Noami, to tell him he understood, to beg his forgiveness for treating him so lightly. But as soon as he entered the door, as soon as he saw Noami standing naked, so desperately afraid, Papu knew. He darted up, nearly toppled the adolescent male body. The two lovers clutched each other's normal, ancient, humanity.

'Never again,' they whispered.

'Never again,' they swore.

Never again.

A Consumer Guide to the Science Fiction of A E VAN VOGT

Compiled by Maxim Jakubowski

Atrocious: •
Bad: ○
Mediocre: *
Average: **
Good: ***
Very Good: ****
Masterpiece: *****

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SLAN	***	****	****	*****	***	****	****	*****	****	***
DESTINATION: UNIVERSE	***	****	****	*	***	****	****	*****	*****	***
VOYAGE OF THE SPACE BEAGLE	****	***	****	○	****	*****	*	*****	*****	****
THE WEAPON SHOPS OF ISHER	****	*****	***	**	****	*****	**	****	***	***
THE WORLD OF NULL-A	*****	*****	*****	•	*****	**	*****	***	***	○
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PLAYERS OF NULL-A	****	****	*****	•	*****	*	***	***		○
THE MIND CAGE	***	**	***		**	**	***	***	****	*
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